

# **Reconciliation in the world of Christian diversity**

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## **RECONCILIATION IN THE WORLD OF CHRISTIAN DIVERSITY**

**A Professional Project**

**presented to**

**the Faculty of the**

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**of the Requirements for the Degree**

**Doctor of Ministry**

**by**

**Marshall L. Hoffman**

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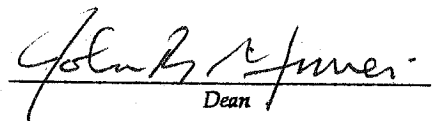
*has been presented to and accepted by the Faculty of the  
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## ABSTRACT

### Reconciliation in the World of Christian Diversity

By

Marshall L. Hoffman

The practical component of this project is to build a model of reconciliation that will equip the ecumenically minded Christian with the language and strategies to reach out in intramural dialogue. Out of this model emerges a series of four sermons on the book of Ephesians that can be used in a retreat setting to facilitate intrachurch dialogue among those pastoral leaders who represent a cross-section of Christian denominations.

In order to discover the prominent features of our model, this project begins with a careful analysis of the diversities inherent in the early church from its origins. From these diversities, the polarizing categories of “orthodoxy” and “heresy” emerged. How can one better understand these polarities inherent in the first three centuries of church history, in a way that will equip one to more effectively engage in contemporary intrachurch dialogue?

It is the strong conviction of this project that the ecumenist, like the bow of a violin, can move across the tension between “orthodoxy” and “heresy,” with a skill that can produce the harmony of reconciliation rather than the dissidence of discord. By learning from the polemics of the past, and the dynamic interactions between the heresiologists and gnostic sects, one may enhance a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18), and exert “every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3).

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The problem addressed by this project is that given the diversity of views that are endemic in contemporary Christianity, and the controversies that shaped early Christianity, how can a study of these competing ideologies provide lessons to enable the church to reach out to those who differ, with strategies that can facilitate unity and enhance the effectiveness of pastoral leadership.

During the first three centuries of church history there was great disparity between how Gnostic Christians viewed themselves and how the bishops perceived them. Many in Gnostic communities regarded themselves as committed followers of Christ. Some of them even gave their lives as martyrs. Many of the Patristic leaders in the “Great Church” attacked them as “heretics” (It should be kept in mind that the parameters of orthodoxy, until the fourth century, were not well established).

This has proven to be very costly because it established a pattern of “us” versus “them,” which we have inherited and unconsciously continue to perpetuate. Gnostics were used as the heretical ‘other’ in order to clarify normative Christianity. The point of this project is that those who wish to minister in widening ecumenical circles can learn much, both pro and con, from the inherent diversities in early Christianity, so that we can establish greater rapport with a broad cross section of theological positions.

It has often been observed that Jesus' prayer for unity in the Upper Room (John 17:20-21)<sup>1</sup> was directed not only to his immediate disciples but "also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word." Nothing could be a more powerful witness to the world, to believe that the Father sent His Son, than for contemporary Christians to make this prayer the centerpiece of their interpersonal and interdenominational relationships. For those who are "called" to this vision of unity, it is a matter of high priority to develop the language and communication skills to enhance this philosophy of ministry.

My thesis is that by a critical analysis of the diversity in the early church, one may find insights and resources to confront the divisive issues inherent in contemporary Christianity in a way that promotes understanding and mutual respect. Because of the nature of the variety of religious experience, diversity is inherent in the evolution of religious institutions. It cannot be avoided, but it can be affirmed and celebrated in ways that promote a common spirituality, which may even move in the direction of greater organizational cooperation.

Until recently we depended upon the Church Fathers for our knowledge of gnostic tendencies in the early church.<sup>2</sup> To a large degree we could only see these tendencies through the eyes of those who were convinced that gnostic believers were outside the realm of the "true" church. The perceptions of those leaders in the established

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<sup>1</sup> All citations of scripture are from the New Revised Standard Version unless otherwise stated.

<sup>2</sup> Kurt Rudolph, *Gnosis: The Nature and History of Gnosticism*, trans. and ed. Robert McLachlan Wilson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1983), 9-34.

church were certainly distorted by their anti-heretical biases. Patristic writers like Justin Martyr of Caesarea, Irenaeus of Lyon (Lyons in English), Tertullian of Carthage, Hippolytus of Rome, Clement and Origen of Alexandria, and Epiphanius of Salamis, could be classified as heresiologists because of their passion to purge the official church from all heretical tendencies and preserve what was regarded as authentic apostolic tradition.

Justin, who died a martyr's death in 165 C.E., is rightly ranked among the foremost of early Christian apologists. He attributed the writings and works of Gnostics to Satanic origin and traced their origin back to Simon Magus of Samaria. Many who followed in the proto-orthodox church borrowed freely from him. Irenaeus of Lyons, writing in the third quarter of the second century, authored five books entitled the "Exposure and Refutation of the Falsely so called Gnosis." It is usually cited by its abbreviated Latin title *Adversus Haereses*. Later apologists also drew heavily on Irenaeus's work to strengthen their arguments. The Nicene Creed of 325 C.E., and other creeds to follow, built upon the foundation laid by Irenaeus. Hippolytus of Rome, who died in the first half of the third century, wrote another massive work, *Refutation of all Heresies*. One of his major claims was that Gnostics took their so-called secret knowledge from Greek philosophy and misused it for their own purposes. Their pagan origins, in his view, covered with a thin façade of Christian terminology, put them outside the "true" church.

Tertullian, who lived during the last half of the second and the first quarter of the third century, argued that the apostolic faith is older than all the heresies, which are later



falsifications. This view became the foundation upon which was build the developing hierarchy of the ecclesiastically oriented segment of Christianity which was becoming more dominant. The conversion of Constantine in 312 C.E. gave this “catholic” branch of Christianity an incredible push toward Irenaeus’s vision of one, unified, apostolic church of unbroken succession from its Founder.

The sharpness of Tertullian’s polemic was of a different sort than the two great Alexandrian theologians, Clement and Origen. Their relative openness to the views of *gnosis* brings them dangerously close to charges of heresy. Clement “attempted to overcome the breach between faith and knowledge in the Church and not to remain stuck in a mere denial of the claims of the ‘false’ gnosis.”<sup>3</sup> His more conciliatory approach sets the tone for this project. A fatal flaw, however, blinded Clement: the view that there was only a single tradition coming from the original Apostles. Following the scholarship of Walter Bauer, this project will challenge that venerated belief.

Origen came even closer to being branded a heretic. His expositions on the Gospel of John are particularly relevant because he uses the allegorical method to discover deeper, esoteric meanings in the texts in order to give scriptural authority to his avant-garde tendencies. This brings him, at times, to the precipice of censorship by Episcopal authority.

Eusebius of Caesarea, who died in 339, is regarded as the Father of church history. In his *History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, he cites older heresiological literature which otherwise would have been lost. His influence is

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 16.

incalculable in establishing the venerated tradition that orthodoxy came first and heresy followed after the death of the apostles. Epiphanius is considered the last of the major apologists who attacked gnostic sects.

Hans Jonas observes that during the fourth century, as the Catholic Church was consolidating its power, “Gnosticism”<sup>4</sup> slipped into the shadows and was no longer perceived as a threat. It remained in the shadows until the nineteenth century when Protestant theologians (mostly German) brought it back from obscurity in hopes that to revisit it would throw light on the very beginnings of the primitive church.<sup>5</sup>

In comparison with the extensive writings of the heresiologists, we had only scanty fragments from the great Gnostics of the second century such as Valentinus. This is a great source of sadness for the researcher in that Gnostics produced, according to Rudolph, the first theological and devotional literature, along with hymns and poems. Rudolph speculates that their output in the second century may have exceeded that of “Mother” church.<sup>6</sup> Most of this was banned and burned by the orthodox bishops who were on a mission to purge the church from “such an abyss of madness and of blasphemy against Christ.”<sup>7</sup> Elaine Pagels has put it so succinctly: “It is the winners who write history—their way.”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> As a noun this word is problematic for scholars like Michael Williams, Karen King and others who regard it as an artificial construct, which mistakenly uses a rhetorical term as a historical entity.

<sup>5</sup> Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion: The Message of the Alien God and the Beginnings of Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), xiv-xv.

<sup>6</sup> Rudolph, 25.

<sup>7</sup> Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses, Praefatio*, hereafter cited as *Haer.*

<sup>8</sup> Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), 142.

This scarcity of original documents all dramatically changed in 1945 with the exciting discovery of the Coptic Gnostic Library near Nag Hammadi in Upper Egypt. These thirteen codices, containing over fifty separate treatises, provide a wealth of primary source material that has transformed this field of research. Their Coptic translations are dated approximately to the middle of the fourth century. Their original gnostic authors, who wrote in Greek, go back another two hundred years to the middle of the second century. Rudolph compares this to the discovery of the Dead Sea scrolls in 1947. Although the latter overshadows the former in the world of scholarship, what happened at Nag Hammadi represents an exciting breakthrough in our understanding of gnostic beliefs from a partisan rather than a polemic point of view. “Both belong to communities which stand at the fringe and took a critical view of the official religion, the Qumran community (the Essenes) over against the Judaism of Jerusalem, the Gnostics over against the orthodox church.”<sup>9</sup>

It is apparent that Nag Hammadi opened a new chapter in the study of *gnosis*. Now we could read more extensively about what these “heretics” believed and taught in their own words. In the light of this discovery we are faced with the realization that the origins of Christianity are even more diverse than even Walter Bauer imagined.

The history of research, in this important field, features some prominent names. Rudolph credits Ferdinand Christian Bauer (1792/1860) as being the founder of research into *gnosis*. In his book, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Earliest Christianity*, he convincingly

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<sup>9</sup> Rudolph, 25.

explodes the “myth” that orthodoxy was first and heresy was a departure from the norm. His monumental work is at the core of this project.

Adolph von Harnack advanced the research by attributing to the Gnosticism of the second century a primary place in the history of dogma. His position regards Gnosticism as the “acute Hellenization of Christianity.”<sup>10</sup> He credits gnostic leaders as being the first serious theologians in the history of Christianity.<sup>11</sup> “Herder has aptly called them ‘the first religious philosophy in Christianity,’ and they had a far-reaching effect, negatively as well as positively, on the subsequent formation of Christian doctrine.”<sup>12</sup> We see that clearly in Irenaeus whose ecclesiastical system arose directly out of his opposition to *gnosis*. To use an Old Testament metaphor of “iron sharpening iron” (Prov. 27:17), so these two interacting systems of faith have honed each other to a razor’s edge.

Hans Jonas sought to explain the nature of Gnosticism on the basis of existentialism. His analysis carried the field from the theoretical world of speculation to man’s self understanding. His insights are reflected in this project when we seek to ground gnostic speculation to those fundamental questions of being which arise from our common humanity. As we frequently hear in classic German literature: “Leben ist einsamsein” (to live is to be alone). In coining the phrase, “the alien God,” Jonas argues convincingly that man’s sense of alienation gave birth to a radical reevaluation of the cosmos and man’s place of forlornness within it.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Adolph von Harnack, *The History of Dogma*, trans. Neil Buchanan, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Williams and Norgate, 1896), 1:226.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>12</sup> Rudolph, 369.

<sup>13</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 49.

In Pagel's helpful analysis of the directions of research, she presents it in three branches.<sup>14</sup> There is one type of research, which focuses upon the relationship of Gnosticism with Hellenistic philosophy. A second category is one that analyzes gnostic texts from the point of view of literary criticism. The third direction, which has engaged her major interest, "explores the relation of gnosticism to its contemporary religious environment."<sup>15</sup> My project draws mainly upon this third category. My focus of concern is to document how gnostic expressions of Christianity interacted with "orthodoxy" and what light this may shine upon the contemporary interactions of religious bodies. This project must keep foremost in mind the understanding that we are what we are today because of this dynamic interplay of competing forces.

One cannot help but wonder how different the shape of Christianity would be today if the Arians had gotten a few more votes and prevailed. What if Valentinus, a key conversation partner in this project, who taught a large following in Rome from ca. 135-165 C.E., had been elected bishop of Rome instead of Pius I? What a profound difference this would have made in the unfolding patterns of Christian thought. Such wonderings are important to this project because they soften the rigid categories of our preconceptions and permit the reshaping of new models for ministry.

On the practical side: what light does this dynamic interplay of forces shine upon our understanding of Christian origins? What sacrosanct presuppositions may have to change to accommodate these new insights? Most importantly, how can these new perceptions equip us to better relate to the diversities within our current religious climate?

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<sup>14</sup> Pagels, *Gnostic Gospels*, xxxiii.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

It is not the purpose of this project to pit one side against the other, or to convert to one side or the other. My purpose is to objectively hold both orthodoxy and gnosticism up to careful scrutiny in order to discover elements of unity in our diversity, both past and present. This project takes the position that a better awareness of our origins will help us to draw circles with a wide enough circumference to embrace diversities that would otherwise be incompatible.

In an effort to limit the scope of this project it will focus on the Valentinian school of Gnosticism. The alleged origins of pre-Christian Gnosticism and expressions of *gnosis* outside the parameters of Christian ideology are beyond the scope of this project. Some eminent scholars have taken the position that “Gnosticism as a religious orientation of enlightenment predates not only the second century but Christianity itself.”<sup>16</sup> Be that as it may, that important field of research is outside our purview. Whether Gnosticism should be seen as an independent movement outside of Christianity, which may have Jewish, Hellenistic, or Persian roots in Zoroastrian tradition, is not a concern of this project.

In presenting the “orthodox” views of the heresiologists, we will focus primarily upon Irenaeus. In presenting the side of unorthodoxy, we will stress the *Gospel of Thomas* and Thomas Christians as a paradigm for understanding the alternate position.

The theoretical component of my project, by its very nature, is oriented to library research. The practical component is aimed toward creating four sermons, based upon the Epistle to the Ephesians, which illustrate the impact of gnostic ideas in the development of

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<sup>16</sup> Gregory J. Riley, “The Gospel of Thomas in Recent Research,” *Currents in Research: Biblical Studies* 2 (1994): 230.

Pauline theology. These sermons are intended for use in a weekend retreat environment. By convening an interdenominational group of pastoral leaders that represents a cross section of theological positions, this sermonic series may be presented as a devotional prelude, or postlude, to encourage intrachurch dialogue.

## CHAPTER 2

### THE PHENOMENON OF DIVERSITY IN THE EARLY CHURCH

In building a model of reconciliation that could be useful in intramural dialogue, it is important to challenge some of our preconceptions. Especially for those of us who grew up in more conservative evangelical churches, a re-examination of long held venerated views may soften the parameters of our belief system enhancing our relational skills with a broad cross-section of theologies.

The pious legend that evolved around the Apostles' Creed is a case in point. J. N. D. Kelly in his book *Early Christian Creeds* quotes from Tyrannius Rufinus (ca. 404).

As they were therefore on the point of taking leave of each other, they first settled an agreed norm for their future preaching, so that they might not find themselves, widely separated as they would be, giving out different doctrines to the people they invited to believe in Christ. So they met together in one spot and, being filled with the Holy Spirit, compiled this brief token, as I have said, of their future preaching, each making the contribution he thought fit; and they decreed that it should be handed out as standard teaching to believers.<sup>1</sup>

Rufinus's hint that each one of the apostles contributed to the creed was later elaborated in vivid detail. Kelley, quotes from *De symbolo*, which is attributed to St. Augustine:

Peter said 'I believe in God the Father, almighty . . . maker of heaven and earth.' . . . Andrew said 'and in Jesus Christ His Son . . . our only Lord.' . . . James said, 'Who was conceived by the Holy Spirit . . . born from the Virgin Mary.' . . . John said 'suffered under Pontius Pilate . . . was crucified, dead and buried.' . . . Thomas said. . . .

An edifying tale indeed, with every phrase of the Apostles' Creed covered by each one of the twelve apostles. So, as the legend goes, they marched out with a unified message to win the world. Win the world they did! It has been estimated that by the time of

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<sup>1</sup> J. N. D. Kelly, *Early Christian Creeds*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Harlow, Essex: Longman Publishers, 1972), 1-2.



Constantine, in less than three hundred years, half the empire had been Christianized.

How does one account for such amazing growth without a unified message?

Professor MacDonald, in the conclusion of his book, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark*, sets forth a series of emulations that I find compelling.

Homer's hero awoke in the middle of a storm and held on for dear life waiting for calm; Mark's hero awoke and stilled the troubled sea, like a Homeric deity. Odysseus left Polyphemus blind; Jesus left the Gerasene demoniac cured of his possession. Odysseus told flabbergasted Telemachus he was no god, just his father; a voice from heaven told the flabbergasted disciples that Jesus was the Son of God. Odysseus left Tiresias in Hades still blind; Jesus restored Bartimaeus's sight and allowed him to travel with him. . . . Odysseus visited Hades and returned, never having died; Jesus actually died and was raised back to life.<sup>2</sup>

The point is that primitive Christianity built upon the rich tradition of Greek epic. Like a *hemitheoi* (half god and half man), Jesus appeared as a hero in the tradition of the Greek heroes, with this exception. He combined in his person all their virtues and none of their defects. Purged of all their moral flaws he stands as the quintessential hero. It was a brilliantly successful attempt to make the evangel effective in the dominant culture. Rather than a unified message, a diverse message that is both complementary and contradictory, presented a hero worthy to die for. In "the fullness of time" (Gal. 4:4) such a message, in all its many facets, broke upon a waiting world rekindling hope.

It is more than likely, even if the apostles had convened a council, they wouldn't have been able to reach a consensus. Certainly those faith communities, which arose in the last half of the first century, which adopted the name of a founding apostle to validate

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<sup>2</sup> Dennis R. MacDonald, *The Homeric Epics and the Gospel of Mark* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 188.

their existence, could not have agreed, as we shall see from the plethora of Christologies that abounded among them.

We are not suggesting that there was anything fraudulent about this edifying tale of an Apostles' Creed. After all, "we tend to rewrite our own histories in order to say something to and about ourselves . . . : 'We are legitimate; we are even better than those who went before.'"<sup>3</sup> The best minds that promoted this charming legend were no doubt aware of its mythical features. As Walter Bauer puts it so eloquently: "Rome viewed it as an altogether legitimate practice in religious controversy to tip the scales with golden weights."<sup>4</sup> It was not the historicity but the practicality of the story that mattered. It *worked* as a powerful tool to unify the church and assure the masses that apostolic authority was on the side of the bishops, who had succeeded the apostles in an unbroken chain of succession. Just as the earliest Christians in Jerusalem "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers" (Acts 2:42) so we today continue steadfast in that tradition.

As a powerful one-two punch, the ecclesiastical church, perhaps as early as the beginning of the third century, promulgated the companion myth of apostolic succession to augment the myth of the Apostles' Creed; in order to consolidate its power and extend its influence throughout the Mediterranean world. According to the story, during the forty days between the resurrection and the ascension, as the apostles remained in Jerusalem, the post-resurrection appearances of Christ connected all the dots and filled in

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Riley, *The River of God: A New History of Christian Origins* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco 2001), 15.

<sup>4</sup> Walter Bauer, *Orthodoxy and Heresy in Early Christianity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Mifflington, Pa.: Sigler Press, 1996), 126.

all the blanks. Ten days after the ascension, the Day of Pentecost equipped them with the power to proclaim the *kerygma*. So Jesus gave it to his apostles and they, having conferred together, went out with one voice to give it to those ordained by the apostles to become bishops. They in turn would preserve it in its pristine purity for the Catholic Church to share with the world.

In all fairness, it bears reflection that the Valentinians claimed their own version of apostolic succession. In Ptolemy's epistle to Flora we read: "For, god permitting, you will next learn about both the first principle and the generation of these two other gods, if you are deemed worthy of the apostolic tradition, which we have received by succession. . ." (Epiphanus, *Against Heresies* 33.7.9). Valentinus claimed to be a disciple of Theudas, who received directly from Paul not only written but oral tradition, which was intended not to be used for public evangelism but for private instruction. These esoteric secret traditions, Valentinus claimed, were a vital part of Paul's ministry, which he used in training more mature believers.

Yet among the mature, we do speak wisdom, though it is not a wisdom of this age, or of the rulers of this age, who are doomed to perish.<sup>5</sup> But we speak God's wisdom, secret and hidden, which God decreed before the ages for our glory. (1 Cor. 2:6-7)

This oral source of secret wisdom was passed down from Jesus, through Paul, to Theudas, who entrusted it to Valentinus. The Valentinians were fond of quoting:

When he was alone, those who were around him along with the twelve asked him about the parables. And he said to them. 'To you has been given the secret of the kingdom of God, but for those outside, everything comes in parables.' (Mark 4:10-11)

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<sup>5</sup> Some gnostics were inclined to regard the "rulers" as bishops of the hierarchical church.

They claimed that the secrets they taught in private were no less than the oral traditions that came from Jesus' deeper wisdom that was reserved for some of his disciples and preserved for gnostic believers.

Hippolytus informs us that the Basilidians also appealed to the authority of apostolic succession. "Basilides, therefore, and Isidorus, the true son and disciple of Basilides, say that Matthias communicated to them secret discourses, which, being specially instructed, he heard from the Saviour" (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VIII.4).

The fact is that every community of Christianity cherished those myths that defined who they were and from whence they came. They all felt the need for self-identification as informed by pious legend. The problem for many denominational groups two millennia later is that they are inclined to take these things too literally. The historiographers have done a valuable service in demonstrating the many missing links in the chain connecting early Christianity with the apostles, not to mention the apostles with the historical Jesus. We are indebted to their objective research and need to incorporate their scholarship into our model of reconciliation. One of the ways to do that is to value the essential role of myth in creating community and establishing corporate identity, without elevating it to the status of dogmatic certainty.

In addition to the twin doctrines of the Apostles' Creed and apostolic succession, the pious legend of the primacy of orthodoxy has been seriously challenged by scholarship. According to this core conviction, it was only after the end of the apostolic age that "certain intruders have stolen in among you . . . who pervert the grace of our

God. . . and deny our only Master and Lord, Jesus Christ” (Jude, 4). In other words, heresy came in later, after the death of the apostles, as an abnormal aberration. As Origen (who ironically was nearly censured for heretical tendencies) stated so succinctly: “all heretics at first are believers; then later they swerve from the rule of faith” (*Commentary on the Song of Songs*, 13).

Eusebius, father of church history (ca. 260-340 C.E.) established this doctrine for the centuries that followed. Looking back on the primitive church from the perspective of a fourth century apologist, he sees Satan sowing tares among the good wheat. As Jesus implied in the Parable of the Weeds (Matt. 13:24-30 and 36-43), the “enemy” would sneak into the field and sow wild wheat under the cover of darkness. The good wheat was there first; the tares came later as a result of a demonic change of tactics. When the evil one realized that the pressure of external persecution was only purifying and empowering the church, he switched strategies to destroy Christianity from within with false doctrine.

In describing the situation at that time Hegesippus goes on to say that until then the Church had remained a virgin, pure and uncorrupted, since those who were trying to corrupt the wholesome standard of the saving message, if such there were, lurked somewhere under cover of darkness. But when the sacred band of the apostles had in various ways reached the end of their life, and the generation of those privileged to listen with their own ears to the divine wisdom had passed on, then godless error began to take shape, through the deceit of false teachers, who now that none of the apostles was left, threw off the mask and attempted to counter the preaching of the truth by preaching the knowledge falsely so called.<sup>6</sup>

Eusebius, passing on to us the beliefs he inherited from the “orthodox” traditions that preceded him, has profoundly influenced our contemporary presuppositions, often

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<sup>6</sup> Eusebius, *The History of the Church from Christ to Constantine*, trans. G. A. Williamson, ed. Andrew Louth (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1965), 3.32.6.

without our awareness. When evangelical Christians claim that the Bible is their supreme authority in all matters of faith and practice, they need to critique carefully whether it is the bible, or Eusebius's interpretation of the bible, which so powerfully shapes our preconceptions. The challenge of this chapter is to look back to the apostolic age of the first century and the century that followed, not through the eyes of Eusebius, but from the vantage point of those who were often in the majority; those who harbored "heretical tendencies," as they were later defined in the fourth century by the international councils of the church.

As one enters the antiquity of the origins of Christianity, as researched by modern scholarship, one enters a realm of complexities that can be both confusing and breathtaking. The first phase in our journey through this labyrinth of diversity is to take a geographical jaunt with Walter Bauer through the major centers of Christianity. With meticulous detail, Bauer blazes a trail of scholarly research from Edessa, the center of Thomas Christianity, to Alexandria, then Syria, Asia Minor, and eventually all the way to Rome. He shows that "heretics" throughout the second century and into the third were often dominant and normally functioned side by side with their more "orthodox" brethren.

As he makes this pilgrimage from east to west through the Mediterranean world, he discovers, as a general principle, the further one was positioned from Rome the more likely one would encounter variations from the apostolic traditions of the church Fathers. To be sure Marcionism and Valentinianism thrived in Rome during the second century.

But in general, the further one traveled from West to East the more melding and mixing one could find.

Walter Bauer's thesis that "certain manifestations of Christian belief that the authors of the church renounced as 'heresies' originally had not been such at all, but, at least here and there, were the only form of the new religion—that is, for those regions they were simply 'Christianity;'"<sup>7</sup> challenged the centuries long assumption that "heresy was a secondary development in the history of Christianity,"<sup>8</sup> "Bauer insisted that writing the history of Christianity backward through the lenses of the later ecclesiastical position distorted the evidence."<sup>9</sup> The trick is to leapfrog over the apologists of the second, third, and fourth centuries, as far as the evidence permits: to see the origins more directly through the eyes of the "heretics" themselves rather than through the hindsight of orthodoxy.

Bauer's first stop is Edessa. Here his research leads him to the conclusion that orthodoxy only gradually and with great difficulty came to prevail. "Ecclesiastical organized Christianity, with cultic edifice, cemetery, and bishop, first appears at the beginning of the fourth century."<sup>10</sup> Up until then "The Great Church" was quite small. The "heretical" majority was composed of a mixture of Marcionites, Bardesanites, and Manichaeans. Bardesanes, a native son of Edessa, seems to have been strongly influenced by Valentinus before breaking off and establishing his own sect. The fact that

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<sup>7</sup> Bauer, xxii.

<sup>8</sup> Karen L. King, *What is Gnosticism?* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 110.

<sup>9</sup> King, *What Is Gnosticism?* 114.

<sup>10</sup> Bauer, 17.

the older section of the *Edessene Chronicle* mentions only three names: Marcion, Bardesanes, and Mani (all representatives of “heretical” Christianity) Bauer finds very telling.

It would be hard to exaggerate the influence of Marcionism in those early years. Justin complained (ca. 150 C.E.) that their false teaching had spread to the whole human race (*Apologetics*. 26.5-6). In like manner Tertullian states: “Marcion’s heretical tradition has filled the whole world” (*Against Marcion* 5.19). Throughout this first chapter Bauer summons his research to argue that, rather than a falling away from the “true” faith in Edessa, Christianity arrived there first in forms that would later be deemed as heretical. There it thrived as a majority for two centuries.

Turning his attention to Egypt he comments on the almost total lack of information from Alexandria until about 180 C.E. One must be careful not to base too much on the argument of silence, however, his point is that this silence concerning the origins of Christianity, in this most important center, reflects that there was nothing good, from the point of orthodoxy, on which to report because of the wide-ranging influence of unorthodoxy. He admits that there is little doubt that there were Christians in Egypt at the beginning of the second century: but of what sort? He sees “Gentile Christians existing alongside of Jewish Christians both resting on syncretistic-gnostic foundations.”<sup>11</sup>

They were not combined into a single community, in his view, but organized around their own Gospel. In Egypt, the Jewish community accepted the *Gospel of the*

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 53.



*Hebrews* as its canonical authority, and the gentiles used the *Gospel of the Egyptians*, each having decided “heretical” tendencies. “Even into the third century no separation between orthodoxy and heresy was accomplished in Egypt and the two types of Christianity were not yet at all clearly differentiated from each other.”<sup>12</sup> One is reminded of a statement from Tertullian, which suggests that it was difficult to discern who the heretics really were because they included those who were regarded as “the most faithful and wisest and most experienced members of the church” (*Prescription Against Heretics* 3.32, trans. Greenslade).

Swinging his attention to Ignatius of Antioch and Polycarp of Smyrna he follows this same line of thinking. Bauer feels one must carefully evaluate the exuberance of Ignatius because he often describes the ideal rather than the real, what things ought to be like rather than the way they were. According to Bauer:

The letter of Ignatius to the Philadelphians allows us to look at the clash of opinions within the company of Christians at the beginning of the second century, when there is no clearly defined boundary between opposing circles, but when all the baptized still remain, at least externally, bound together as a unit.<sup>13</sup>

He pulls a quote from Polycarp’s *Letter to the Philippians*. He is struggling with Docetism that would deny that Jesus has come in the flesh. He says: “Therefore let us abandon the foolishness of *the great majority* and the false teachings, and let us return to the word which was transmitted to us from the beginning” (Polycarp, *Letter to the Philippians* 7.2, italics added). It seems clear that the overwhelming majority, “the error of the great masses” (2.1) sided against the ecclesiastical faith.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 131.

He follows this direction of research through Asia Minor, as far as Rome herself. In each region he finds evidence to support his thesis that “heresy” in many areas was primary, not a later distortion of “orthodoxy.” In the view of this project, he convincingly explodes the myth that “orthodoxy” came first. For some of us who received our training in more conservative environs, this may represent something of a sea change. As uncomfortable as that may be, it is a vital preparation to a more meaningful multicultural and interdenominational dialogue. One of the predominant features in our model of reconciliation is a willingness to sacrifice “sacred cows” and keep our categories open to new ideas. Hardening of the categories (like hardening of the arteries) can be fatal in intramural and inter-faith dialogue.

With this geographical jaunt under our belt, perhaps we can better appreciate Irenaeus’s comment on the proliferation of gnostic sects: “Now in addition, from the aforementioned Simonians a multitude of gnostics have sprung up, and have become shown forth like mushrooms [no doubt poisonous ones] growing out the ground” (*Haer.* 1.29.1, trans. B. Layton). With another vivid metaphor Irenaeus likens the frightening varieties of gnostic speculation to the multi-headed hydra of Greek mythology (*Haer.* 1.30.15).

To look at this phenomenon of diversity from a different angle, we have only to consider the canon itself. We will find that it exhibits the same tendencies toward diversity. Bentley Layton paints the picture of a missionary traveler itinerating from

church to church throughout the Mediterranean world in 200 C.E.<sup>14</sup> She would be aware of the great variety of canons that were used in different regions in the Roman Empire. In Rome she would doubtless encounter many congregations affiliated with the Marcionites. Around 145 C.E, Marcion formulated a very restrictive canon composed only of a redacted form of Luke, purged of the birth narrative, and thirteen of the Epistles of Paul, also edited to eliminate the material that was in conflict with his radical dualism. Of course there would be no Old Testament because Marcion, perhaps not a gnostic himself, because of his Pauline emphasis which elevated faith over knowledge as the means of salvation: he agreed, nevertheless, with the gnostic position that identified *Yahweh* with *Yaldabaoth*, the flawed *demiurge*, untimely offspring of *Sophia*, who created this imperfect material world. “Then there is a certain Marcion of Pontus, who is still teaching his converts that there is another God greater than the Fashioner” (*First Apology of Justin* 26.87). While visiting other churches in the imperial city, she would find other collections of scripture being used, which did include the Hebrew bible.

Arriving at Alexandria she would find a well-educated faction of Christianity making good use of the Old Testament along with most of the books in our present day New Testament. Considered of equal authority they would use “*the Gospel According to the Hebrews, Revelation of Peter, Preaching of Peter, Epistle of Barnabas, Epistle of Clement, Traditions of Matthew, Teaching of the Twelve Apostles, Gospel of Peter, Acts*

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<sup>14</sup> Bentley Layton, *The Gnostic Scriptures* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1987), xx.

*of Pilate, Clementine Recognitions, Epistles of Ignatius, Acts of Paul, and The Shepherd.*"<sup>15</sup>

Continuing her missionary journeys she arrives in Edessa of Mesopotamia. Syrian Christians who venerated St. Thomas would greet her. She would find them turning to the Gospel of Thomas as their authority for the sayings of Jesus. They would supplement these sayings with a harmony of the life of Jesus called the Diatessaron, produced about 170 C.E. by Tatian. It skillfully weaved the four separate Gospels into one harmonized life of Jesus. Also she would find that in Syriac speaking churches a third letter to the Corinthians was considered canonical.

Layton paints this vivid picture to give us a clearer idea of the variety of authoritative collections of scripture that were in use by the end of the second century. No wonder people like Celsus, with biting sarcasm, so effectively attacked the church on the grounds that Christians did not agree with each other. Professor Riley speculates that this must have produced great material for the comedians in the theaters. "Thinking back to the earlier days of the martyrs: 'The animals weren't enough; now they're eating each other' or, 'We don't need to throw Christians to the lions; just throw them to other Christians!'"<sup>16</sup>

Something had to be done, especially during the flowering of Gnosticism throughout the second century, if the church was to consolidate her power and extend her influence to all corners of the empire. One of the most powerful tools in the hands of the evolving mainstream church, to establish "normative" Christianity, was to develop a list

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. (Italics in original.)

<sup>16</sup> Riley, *River of God*, 82.

of authorized books that would become a canon (“yardstick”, a carpenter’s term; something like a plumb line that could test the perpendicular). Being in key positions of power the orthodox clerics were able to eliminate from the official list anything they regarded as not serving the needs of their brand of officialdom. Armed with the powerful weapons of a closed canon, the doctrine of apostolic succession, “the rule of faith,” and a centralized hierarchy that was sanctioned by imperial authority: the tide of battle turned and the fate of the “heretics” was sealed.

One of the clearest manifestations of the multifaceted diversities inherent in the earliest expressions of Christianity is the various Christologies that were current from the very beginnings. Jesus asks the quintessential Christological question to his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” (Matt. 16:13). One will recall from the context that there were various answers to that question reported by the disciples. “Some say” this, “still others,” say that. Throughout the remainder of the first century, and following, these interpretations of the meaning of Jesus’ person and work have assumed a multiplicity of forms.

For example, in the three hundred years before the general councils of the church, which set the parameters of orthodoxy and identified heresy, Docetism was widely embraced by a large number of sincere followers of Christ. The Greek work, *dokeō*, means, among other things, “to seem or to appear to be.” In those early years many Christians had no difficulty believing in the full divinity of Jesus. Some of them, however, had trouble accepting his real humanity. A popular notion arose that while Jesus had the appearance of a normal human, he was somehow different in substance. As

we would expect, with their radical dualism, which looked upon material things as evil, this was the Christology of choice among the various gnostic sects. As Rudolph has said: “It is well known that gnostic soteriology, by accepting the historical redeemer figure of Jesus, transferred its dualism on to it and arrived at the so-called Docetism.”<sup>17</sup>

It was, however, not the sole province of fringe elements. The more mainstream Johannine community, which wrote in the name of their great Apostle, exhibits Docetic tendencies.

Sometimes when I meant to touch him I encountered a material, solid body; but at other times again when I felt him, his substance was immaterial and incorporeal, as if it did not exist at all. . . . And I often wished, as I walked with him, to see his footprint in the earth, whether it appeared – for I saw him raising himself above the earth – and I never saw it. (*Acts of John* 93)

In this highest form of Christology, Jesus is perceived as wholly divine who only seemed to be human, like a Greek God who had a human appearance but was of the stuff of immortality.

In a Valentinian fragment quoted verbatim by St. Clement of Alexandria, the docetic understanding of the nature of Jesus’ body is applied even to his digestive process: “Jesus digested divinity; he ate and drank in a special way, without excreting his solids. He had such a great capacity for continence that the nourishment within him was not corrupted, he did not experience corruption” (Clement, *Stromateis* 3.59.3).

In a Gospel that stresses the incarnation of divine Logos: “. . . the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us. . . .” (John 1:1 and 1:14), we might not expect even embryonic traces of Docetism. But the

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<sup>17</sup> Rudolph, 372.

phrase, “the Word became flesh,” might mean that he has entered into the earthly and human sphere, which any gnostic could affirm. “The Gospel of John shows very clearly how fluid are the limits between primitive Christian and gnostic conceptions at this point.”<sup>18</sup> The two Alexandrian theologians, Origen and Clement were long enamored by docetic Christologies, which, in their time were not expressly labeled as heretical. So let us not presume that the chasm between a *Logos* doctrine and a Docetic denial of the real humanity of Christ is too wide to span. There are scholars who see evidence of an active and verbal element of Docetic believers in the Johannine community from its early inception. Can we then turn to this community, which claimed John the son of Zebedee as their founding father, as a model on which we can build a strategy of reconciliation?

The Fourth Gospel was a favorite among Valentinian Gnostics as we can see from *The Gospel of Truth*, (a devotional tract that may have well been written by Valentinus himself) which alludes to this canonical Gospel at least fourteen times. The dualism of light and darkness, flesh and spirit, body and soul, as well as the mystical element of abiding in Christ, the emphasis on “knowing” the Father and the Son in a personal acquaintance, and a spiritualized concept of resurrection as a present reality; many branches of Gnosticism would have found appealing.

Riley sees the Johannine community as having “the most inclusive Christology of the early Church that was able to assimilate many views of Jesus.”<sup>19</sup> The “secret” of their

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 150.

<sup>19</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *I Was Thought To Be What I Am Not: Docetic Jesus and the Johannine Tradition*, Occasional Paper, no. 31 (Claremont, Calif: Institute for Antiquity and Christianity, 1994), 22.

syncretism, in his view, was their devotion to the person of Jesus. Anyone or anything that centered on that center was considered a part of the family of God. He explains this as a centered set versus a bounded set. A bounded set often has rigid boundaries that define the parameters of “truth.” Anyone who positions herself within those borders must be in agreement with everyone else in order to be welcome. Those who differ are regarded as outsiders. A centered set may be without borders. The only thing that matters is the center. Only by rejecting the center are they excluded from the fold. Throughout this project as we build our model of reconciliation, we will seek to break down boundaries and argue for the magnet of a common center that pulls us to itself and at the same time toward each other. Ideally, the closer we are to that center the nearer we approach one another. The metaphor of a magnet rather than a line that separates “us” and “them” is intrinsic to our project.

The paradigm of a heliocentric rather than a geocentric universe is an intrinsic feature of our model. Instead of building our world of religious awareness with ourselves at the center: we endeavor to find a “Son” which is massive enough in meaning to hold us in concentric orbits around itself. The gravitational pull of such a “Super Star” does not need borders. It creates orbits. The orbit that is farthest from the center, regardless of denominational label, is still a part of our solar system. Our vision is to move from an ethnocentric to a Christocentric consciousness.

The popularity of a docetic interpretation of Jesus, professor Riley sees reflected in the miracle of the feeding of the 5,000. This sign is followed by the shocking claim: “I am the living bread that came down from heaven. Whoever eats of this bread will live



forever; and the bread that I will give for the life of the world is my flesh” (John 6:51).

When a great dispute arose concerning this controversial claim, Jesus retorted: “It is the spirit that gives life; the flesh is useless” (6:63). In John’s critique of Jesus’ controversial statement he says: “The words that I have spoken to you are spirit and life” (6:63).

Someone of a Docetic bent could have heard that statement something like this: ordinary flesh and blood is worthless, but the spiritual flesh that enshrouded the soul of Jesus, being qualitatively different from “normal” human flesh, can become Manna from Heaven. Only a docetic Jesus could become the food of immortality, as they may have thought. On the other hand, someone of a more incarnational bent might have thought: Jesus is the *Logos* of God, in our midst, in human flesh. Therefore his *words* are the words of God. As I meditate upon those words and internalize them by faith, it is like, in a spiritual sense, ingesting his life.

For professor Riley, part of the genius of the Fourth Gospel, written in simple but flawless Greek, is that it allowed for such a diversity of views. In building our model of reconciliation we need to be very sensitive to language, which is flexible enough to accommodate a diversity of Christologies. The language of John’s *Logos* theology could be used by both Athanasius: who insisted that Jesus was *homoousios* (the same substance with the Father); and Arius, who added that famous *Iota*, *homoiousios* (of similar substance with the Father). Never was a letter in the Greek alphabet so divisive. That letter makes not one iota of a difference when our language has the flexibility to create space for a wide variety of religious experience. The Fourth Gospel has much to teach us in this regard.

The eclectic efforts of the Johannine community to reach out and include believers who represented a broad spectrum of Christologies are close to the heart of this project. Those syncretistic tendencies in the Johannine community provide us with a paradigm upon which this project draws inspiration. If we see John as the “spiritual father of an enduring community that produced varied literature in his name, divided, among other ways, on the issue of the nature of Jesus’ body,”<sup>20</sup> we can better understand how Docetism could coexist along side of an incarnational theology. At the same time we can begin to appreciate how “heresy” and “orthodoxy” could co-exist side by side, before developing dogma and ecclesiastical dominance pushed them apart.

From the highest Christology of Docetism the pendulum swings to the lowest Christologies that recognized only the humanity of Jesus. The Ebionites, who may have been closely related to the original Jewish Christians in Palestine, practiced an exclusive brand of monotheism that could only allow Jesus a subordinate role to the Father. The word means “the Poor” (from the Hebrew *ebionim*) which may reflect their ascetical practice of renouncing all material wealth. The heresiologists use that word in derision to describe how impoverished their Christology was. As Eusebius said:

The ancients properly called these people Ebionites, because they held poor and humble opinions concerning Christ. For they thought him a plain and common man, justified by the fact alone of his progress in ethics, born from intercourse of a man and Mary. (*History of the Church* 3.27.1-2)

One branch of the Ebionites were inclined to view Jesus, born only of Joseph and Mary without divine intervention. They interpreted Isaiah 7:14 as referring only to a

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<sup>20</sup>Gregory J. Riley, *One Jesus Many Christs* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1997), 126.

“young woman,” not a virgin. The Hebrew *alma*, does not necessarily mean virgin in the literal sense. However the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Old Testament, which appeared around 250 B.C.E., used *parthenos*, which can only mean a virgin. The Parthenon, a Greek temple dedicated to Athena, the virgin daughter of Zeus, illustrates this point. Justin Martyr, debating with Trypho around 135 C.E., defends the virgin birth. Trypho, a non-Christian Jew replies:

Moreover, in the fables of those who are called Greeks, it is written that Perseus was begotten of Danae, who was a virgin; he who was called among them Zeus having descended on her in the form of a golden shower. And you ought to feel ashamed when you make assertions similar to theirs, and rather should say that this Jesus was born man of men. And if you prove from the Scriptures that He is the Christ, and that on account of having led a life conformed to the law, and perfect, he deserved the honor of being elected to be Christ, it is well; but do not venture to tell monstrous phenomena, lest you be convicted of talking foolishly like the Greeks. (*Dialogue with Trypho*, 67)

Trypho seems to say: could it be proven from Old Testament Scripture that Jesus was indeed the Christ (which he doesn't believe is possible) it would not be by special, miraculous birth, which smacks of Pagan fables; it would be by divine election, because Jesus was worthy of the honor by the purity of his life lived in perfect obedience to God. Had Trypho converted to Christianity, he most likely would have had an adoptionistic Christology.

With their exclusive monotheism, that was a view that many Jewish converts to Christianity felt more comfortable with, and more compatible with their cultural expectations. In Hebrew thought, if the nation Israel is the Son of God it is so by grace and adoption, not by procreation. In this same metaphorical sense the king was often called *huios theou*. So it was natural to think of Jesus, because of the purity of his heart

and the moral perfection of his life, as the adopted Son of God. *Anyone* who attained that level of sinlessness might have been so adopted. But only Jesus has qualified for that exalted position by perfectly fulfilling the *Torah*. That which is special about Jesus, then, is not in his generation but in his perfect compliance with the moral laws of God, as reflected in the Ten Commandments.

The whole issue of Jewish Christianity is a complex one that should not be over simplified. It would be much too easy to paint all Jewish Christians in the second century with the broad brush of subordinational Christology. Bauer's point is well taken: "... adoptionistic Christology was not a general feature of all Jewish Christian circles. In fact, the presence of a preexistence Christology in Jewish Christian literature can be demonstrated"<sup>21</sup>

Origin identifies two types of Ebionites: "the first group agreeing with us that Jesus is from a virgin, and the others who say this is not so, but that he was born as the rest of men" (*Contra Celsum* 5:61). The first group of Ebionites accepted the birth narrative recorded in Matthew, feeling no need to discard it, because they may have regarded it as a confirmation of their angel Christology. Mary's impregnation by the Spirit of God insured that her son would be an earthly embodiment of an angelic being. Drawing from their rich Old Testament tradition involving the "angel of the Lord," who was worshipped and appeared in human form, it was predictable that they would see in this a prefiguring of Jesus. In this way they could preserve their exclusive monotheism and at the same time venerate Jesus as the highest of all created beings. Irenaeus, bishop

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<sup>21</sup> Bauer, 274.

of Lyons, writing around the middle of the second century says: "Those, however, who are called Ebionites . . . use that Gospel alone which is according to Matthew and deny the apostle Paul, saying that he is an apostate from the Law" (*Haer.* 1.26.2). Unlike the Western Church which sided more with Paul in thinking that the age of the Mosaic Law was over, these Near Eastern Jewish Christians held tenaciously to Sabbath observance, circumcision, and the customs which had evolved around the Law.

We would not expect traces of a low Christology in the Fourth Gospel because of the exalted place it gives to Jesus. Yet we are told that some branches of Ebionism were fond of quoting various verses in John, among which was 14:28. "If you loved me, you would rejoice that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I." They must have also warmed up to John 5:19: "The Son can do nothing of himself, but what he sees the Father do."

The Ebionites and others who leaned toward a more natural Christology must have perceived it as a tribute to the One God, and an act of love toward His Son and their Savior. They must have felt they were following in the footsteps of their *Kyrios* who said to the young man who spoke with such respect to him: "Good Master, what good thing shall I do, that I may have eternal life?" Jesus reply was: "Why callest thou me good? There is none good but one, that is, God" (Matt. 19:16 f., KJV). In recognizing the greater goodness of his Father, they felt they were showing the highest respect for his Son. They were, in the view of this paper, genuine and fervent followers of Jesus, as they understood him. Their orbit of influence must be studied and they must be included in our "Son" centered universe.

Could they have found affirmation and toleration in the Johannine churches? It is the view of this project that they could and did. Just as the Docetics had a voice because of their high view of Christ's divinity, the Ebionites might have found fellowship because of their high view of Jesus' humanity. In a community, which centered on the person of Christ, their high view of the humanity of Jesus, without moral imperfection, might have gained them entrance. The syncretizing tendencies of the Johannine tradition, to absorb various Christologies and incorporate them into their community of faith, are a tribute, I believe, to their devotion to the personhood of Jesus. At this stage they were not encumbered by the rigid demands of orthodoxy. Therefore anything that magnified his presence and power in their midst could be useful. "As long as Jesus occupied the spiritual center of his followers, he became identified with whatever could evoke that center."<sup>22</sup> Both high and low Christologies are capable of this and thus potentially welcome in a *logos* community with a strong incarnational theology. It seems that our model of reconciliation is expanding to include those of the highest and lowest Christologies.

If we label Docetism a high Christology and Ebionism a low Christology, then Modalism (sometimes called Sabellianism) would occupy some of the middle ground. Modalism was a popular attempt to avoid the extremes of Tritheism, on one hand, and denying the deity of Christ on the other. In order to unify the godhead and preserve Monotheism, the divine Monad was conceived as taking various modes of expression. Father, Son and Holy Spirit were not three in one, but One Person revealed in three

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<sup>22</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *I Was Thought to Be What I Am Not*, 22.

modalities. In this view the Father became the Son at the incarnation. Then the Father/Son became the Holy Spirit after the resurrection. There appears to be Modalistic tendencies in the Christology of Paul. In comparing Adam, the head of a fallen race, with Jesus, the head of redeemed humanity, we read: "The first man, Adam, became a living being; the last Adam became a life giving spirit" (1 Cor. 15:45). This life giving spirit, which infuses the church with power to witness, sounds very close to the Holy Spirit. Paul often speaks of the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of Christ, or the Spirit of Jesus. We recall how the "spirit of Jesus" did not allow Paul and his team to enter Bythnia (Acts 16:7). He even goes so far as to say: "Now the Lord is the Spirit, and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom" (2 Cor. 3:17). It almost sounds like he is saying that the spirit of Jesus and the Holy Spirit are one in the same, Jesus without a body so to speak.

In response to the challenge of philosophical monotheism over half a millennium, there was a strong tendency in Greco-Roman culture to syncretize the gods, one god being expressed in various modes. This is evident in the Asclepius cult where Zeus is represented as working his healings through his grandson, the son of Apollo. Zeus/Apollo/Asclepius is very similar to the position of Modalism, one God in three expressions. This tendency to unify the functions of the gods gave early Christians a model from which they could draw in understanding what Jesus meant to them.

In the *Apocryphon of John* we find traces of Modalism.

[I was afraid, and behold I] saw in the light [a youth who stood] by me. While I looked [at him he became] like an old man. And he [changed his] likeness (again) becoming like a servant. There was [not a plurality] before me, but there was a [likeness] with multiple forms in the light, and the [likenesses] appeared through each other, and the likeness had three forms. . . . I am the Father, I am the Mother, I am the Son. . . . (NHL, *The Apocryphon of John* II 2, 1-15)

This one “likeness” in three “forms” is strongly modalistic.

In the Upper Room discourse Jesus is seeking to prepare his disciples for his death the following morning. He promises them the *Paraclete*: One who will draw along side to comfort and encourage them. While instructing them of the Holy Spirit he also says: “I will not leave you orphaned; *I am coming to you*” (John 14:28). Again, it almost sounds like the Holy Spirit is the ghost of Jesus, Jesus without a physical body. Modalists were often accused of patripassionism. How could God suffer and die on a cross? To whom was Jesus praying in the Garden of Gethsemane—himself? A Modalist, quoting the Fourth Gospel, might be quick to retort: “I and my Father are one,” and “whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 10:30 and 14:9).

Writing around 200 CE, Tertullian indicates that the Modalists were in the majority because they represented the uneducated classes, which always form the largest segment of the population.

The simple, indeed—I will not call them unwise and unlearned—who always constitute the majority of believers, are startled at the dispensation (of the Three in One). . . . The numerical order and distribution of the Trinity they assume to be a division of unity . . . while they take to themselves pre-eminently the credit of being worshipers of the one God. (*Against Praxeas* 3)

The later creedal formula, “one God in three persons” would have been acceptable to the majority of Modalists during the second century. “The Latin word *persona* originally referred to the mask that an actor wore to mark the character being played on stage. . . . So one God played three roles—not simultaneously, but successively.”<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Riley, *River of God*, 65.



The question arises, what if so many of those early Christians, who were deemed “heretics” by the creeds of the fourth century, were right? What if the “orthodox” are really the “heretics” and vice versa? Such questions give us pause to reflect and such reflections prepare us for styles of ministry that are more inclusive and open to wide ranging diversities. If a few more votes on one side or the other, at Nicaea, or Constantinople, could have radically changed the shape of contemporary Christianity: that modifies the whole tone of our interdenominational dialogues.

Professor Riley likes to visualize the Common Era with the metaphors of a funnel and an hourglass. Like a funnel broadens out into a wide base, so, according to the pious legend promoted by ecclesiastical Christianity: after the death of the apostles, the stream of apostolic tradition, which had been homogeneous up to that point, broadened out into a plurality of “heretical” views. Riley argues that we should replace the funnel with an hourglass. The top section pictures the first two centuries of our history. In the third and fourth centuries we have the emerging dominance of western style Christianity, and with it a constricting of orthodoxy in the formulations of creeds and narrowing strictures of organizational structure in the hierarchy of a mono-episcopate.

This effectively throttled the spirit of creativity found in many of the heretical sects that were being more and more marginalized. This constriction continued until, like an hourglass, it broadened out again in the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. Like a “river of God” (to use another of Riley’s favorite metaphors) this external pressure to conform to rigid statements of faith, caused one of the major streams to go underground. From time to time it would bubble to the surface, as we find in

Jewish and Christian mysticism. One could make a compelling case that later forms of mysticism were a spiritualized form of Gnosticism in which the ascent of the soul is internalized. In place of a mythical itinerary past various stations of the cosmos, an ascending scale of mental states is sought which bring the mystic into union with God. In this new medium Gnosticism lives on long after its demise as a religious movement. Armed with this insight, a reconciler is better equipped to see remnants and echoes of gnostic ideas still alive in contemporary Christianity and to celebrate their survival.

The metaphor of a river, with tributaries feeding into it, is a powerful symbol to conceptualize the flow of the progressive development of religious concepts. Many great rivers like the Nile form triangular deltas, dividing into smaller streams, which deposit their silt at the river's mouth. As the great river fans out, it creates marshes and wetlands that are often teeming with multiple forms of wild life. The most fertile part of a major river may be this alluvial soil, which is deposited at its mouth. As the river of God flowed into the mouth of Christianity, it fanned out into a complex network of diversity that is to be, in the view of this project, treasured for the richness of its creativity. We are endeavoring to construct a model of intramural dialogue that celebrates diversity rather than controlling it with institutional strictures.

How should one respond to this analysis of the origins and early developments of Christianity? It would surely seem that diversity is the norm and uniformity is an anomaly that is attained only by the formation of institutional, hierarchical structures that make the rules and draw the boundaries, insisting that others conform to its standards because it alone has apostolic authority. This kind of control not only requires a single

chain of command from the top down; it needs the formulas of creedal categories to differentiate the “true” from the “false.”

In Gnosticism we seem to find a phenomenon that is organized from the bottom up. It has little institutionalism to defend or preserve. It appears to have much more freedom for spontaneity and what some would call, “the movement of the spirit.” Because it does not regard itself as the true church, the final repository and guardian of the faith, it is freer to run the risk of encouraging and empowering common people to find their individual paths to enlightenment. These individual paths are less dependent upon bishops, priests, and deacons who alone minister the saving sacraments. They are more dependent upon each “seeker” being one’s own priest. As one can readily see, this made the work of a priest more difficult and less indispensable. This emphasis on the priesthood of the believer would come to the fore again in the Reformation more than a millennium later.

What path are we traveling? Can these two paths run parallel or must they branch off in opposite directions? Do we have a deadly dichotomy here that demands a final choice? Or can we mix and meld until we find an equilibrium that combines the best of both worlds? Best of all, can we find a common center that, like our sun, is massive enough in meaning to hold us together in our various denominational orbits?

As we sensitize ourselves to the amazing degree of diversity within the “orthodox” church that is equaled, if not excelled, by the sects within Gnosticism, we should arm ourselves against the danger of allowing our categories to devolve into

clichés and caricatures. Our time-honored presupposition such as: Gnosticism is inherently dualistic, needs to be continually challenged by the critique of scholarship.

The Nag Hammadi Library has bestowed upon us so many Gnostic writings in which dualism plays no special role that there is reason to ask whether our usual premises are really correct: is dualism actually so essential to Gnosis as one has always said, and if so, which kind?<sup>24</sup>

It is for this reason that a number of scholars, such as Michael Williams and Karen King, have suggested that we “dismantle” these “dubious categories.”<sup>25</sup> Rather than throwing out the baby with the bath, this project advocates a continual use of the time-honored categories but with great caution. We must build this ingredient into our model of reconciliation until we are willing, even eager, to challenge any doctrinal position we hold sacred, in order to open ourselves to dialogue. Our dialogic model rests on the foundation that there is nothing too sacrosanct to challenge.

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<sup>24</sup> Hans-Martin Schenke, “The Phenomenon of Gnostic Sethianism,” in *The Rediscovery of Gnosticism*, vol. 2: Sethian Gnosticism, ed. Bentley Layton (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 612.

<sup>25</sup> Michael Allen Williams, *Rethinking “Gnosticism”: An Argument for Dismantling a Dubious Category* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

## CHAPTER 3

### THREE WAYS TO DEAL WITH DIVERSITY

In the second chapter we documented the wide-ranging diversities inherent in the origins of Christianity. A clear view of this can modify our presuppositions and make us more tentative and more tolerant toward others who take different positions. This softening of our doctrinal biases is a good first step toward a more inclusive philosophy of ministry.

We are tempted to think that these controversies in the early church cannot compare with the multiform diversities in contemporary Christianity. Yet, many of these modern fissures and fractures within the “body of Christ” often share a common creed, canon, and similar celebrations of sacraments. These common elements were not often in place during the first three centuries. It could be argued, therefore, that our challenge toward ecumenicity is not as complicated as theirs. This positive perception may encourage us in our efforts toward integration. It could be argued that our problems are more solvable when seen in the light of our origins. We labor in the hope that not only is our task somewhat easier, but also our potential for success is greater.

In this third chapter we want to look at three ways of dealing with diversity. There is the way of orthodoxy as represented by the great apologists of the church. Space does not allow us to survey the polemics of all the heresiologists. Instead we will focus primarily upon Irenaeus, (ca. 180) Bishop of the diocese of Lugdunum in Lyon (English, Lyons), a Roman province in Gaul (modern France). He will serve as a paradigm for

understanding the response of orthodoxy, in general, to what was certainly perceived as a threat to the authority of the “catholic” church in its nascent form.

On the other end of the spectrum we will view the *Gospel of Thomas* and Thomas oriented Christians as representing the position of unorthodoxy. Scholars had known of the existence of the *Gospel of Thomas* for many years because they were able to track its footprints in the writings of the Church Fathers as they quoted selections from it. When it was finally discovered at Nag Hammadi in 1945, scholars were now able to study it in context and see it not just through the eyes of the opponents of “heresy,” but hear it directly from the lips of the people who embraced this alternative to orthodoxy.

Between these two poles, we will look at the Valentinian school of Gnosticism as a reform movement within the church that tried, even if unsuccessfully, to be a mediating factor. In employing the overused category of “heresy,” which unfortunately carries a pejorative connotation, we are not suggesting that the multiformity of Christianity can be comprehended so simply as truth verses error. We simply use this method of analysis to help us appreciate the interaction of forces, all with social and political implications, which shaped Christianity into the form we see today. Our cherished beliefs were forged in the furnace and shaped on the anvil of controversy. By better understanding those controversies, we hope to approach the heterodoxies of our own era with more objectivity and maturity.

As we pursue this project we should keep the social, cultural, and political implications in mind. Those who are more inclined to theoretical speculation may think that the force of clashing and conflicting ideas was the most formative factor in this

dynamic interaction of orthodoxy and heterodoxy. Academically oriented individuals are inclined to think that there is nothing more powerful than an idea, come of age, to change the world. As valuable as a theological perspective is, one needs the earthly realities of sociological and political analyses to understand that orthodoxy prevailed largely because its belief system appealed to the *hoi polloi* (the many) rather than the *pneumatic* (the spiritual elite who has reached higher levels of enlightenment). To a large degree, the orthodox branch of the church won the day, because its views proved more useful to the hierarchy in consolidating the ecclesiastical church and extending its dominance throughout the empire.

Everywhere we look, it seems, we see the reality of these mundane forces working behind the scenes: discarding some ideas and using others to build a more powerful institution. One cannot help but wonder if the Christian church could have survived in its gnostic manifestations. With its informal structure and its own internal divisiveness, could Gnosticism, as a separate entity, have gone on to become a world religion? This is highly unlikely in Pagel's view. At any rate, it appears that the gnostic emphasis on the individual and her path to personal enlightenment could not compete with Irenaeus's *regula fidei* (rule of faith) in building the solidarity of an imperial institution. Sensitivity to this can aid us immensely in evaluating the different shapes of various belief systems and forging a strategy of reconciliation.

There is a very entertaining section of Irenaeus's five-volume work, *The Refutation and Overthrow of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*, often referred to by its Latin title *Adversus Haereses*, that may provide some context. In what may well be an

apocryphal story, the Apostle John, son of Zebedee, is enjoying the relaxation of a public bath in Ephesus. Upon being informed that his archenemy, the “heretic” Cerinthus, was also bathing there; he rushed forth crying out: “Let us escape, lest the bath should fall while Cerinthus the enemy of the truth is in it” (*Haer.* 3.4). Immediately following we read, “Polycarp himself, when Marcion once met him . . . said, ‘Do you know us?’ He answered, ‘I know you, the first-born of Satan’” (*Ibid*). Because Polycarp (revered bishop of Smyrna who was martyred at 86 years of age) was the mentor of Irenaeus in his youth, it is remotely possible that Irenaeus heard this story of the bathhouse directly from him, who heard it directly from John. Whether that is the case or not, it certainly expresses the inclination of the orthodox to avoid those it branded heretical.

The canonical letter of Second John expresses the intensity of the animosity:

Everyone who does not abide in the teaching of Christ [that he “has come in the flesh”], but goes beyond it [beyond simple believing to higher levels of enlightenment], does not have God. . . . Do not receive into the house or welcome anyone who comes to you and does not bring this teaching; for to welcome is to participate in the evil deeds of such a person.” (2 John :9-11)

Tertullian expressed his anti gnostic bias very forcefully:

What has Jerusalem to do with Athens, the church with the Academy, the Christian with the heretic? Our principles come from the Porch of Solomon, who had himself taught that the Lord is to be sought in simplicity of heart. I have no use for a Stoic or a Platonic or dialectic Christianity. After Jesus Christ we have no need of speculation, after the Gospel no need of research. When we come to believe, we have no desire to believe anything else; for we begin by believing that there is nothing else which we have to believe. (*Prescriptions Against Heretics* 7.36, trans. Greenslade)

We find this hostile attitude coming through Irenaeus’s writings repeatedly. It would, however, be a mistake to regard this famous Patristic as adverse and intolerant to any and all forms of diversity. In his vision of one true, universal church, he realized that the



monarchial bishop system would have to accommodate a considerable degree of differing Christologies and theologies. Why then did *gnosis* go beyond the border of acceptance and inspire his wrath denouncing their secret writings as “an abyss of madness, and blasphemy against Christ”? (*Haer.*, I. Preface).

On the surface we might speculate that Irenaeus found, much to his dislike, the creative ferment within Gnosticism that invented and revised elaborate mythologies, something that could not be tolerated. He preferred not the flexibility of constantly evolving cosmologies and mythologies, but the firm foundation of fixed precepts that could not be added to or taken from. He realized that the “heretics” were reading the same book but coming to vastly different interpretations. So, in addition to canonical scripture, he proposed a “rule of truth” (*Haer.* I. 22.1). This would become the fixed lens through which all should view the scriptures in coming to the “right” beliefs. “Holding, therefore, this rule, we shall easily show, notwithstanding the great variety and multitude of their opinions, that these men have deviated from the truth” (I. 22.1).

Irenaeus often commiserates over gnostic propensities of coming up with innovations no one ever thought of before. “Everyday everyone of them invents something new, and none of them is considered perfect unless he is productive in this way” (*Haer.* I.18.5). They had no basis for these flights of fancy and wild imaginings, in the apologist’s view: no foundation in apostolic tradition, only their own intuition. “They are to be blamed for . . . describing human feelings . . . and ascribing the things that happen to human beings, and whatever they recognize themselves as experiencing, to the divine Word” (*Haer.* II.13.3-10). This was a constant source of irritation that proved, to

his satisfaction, that their beliefs were “void of divine understanding” because “the real Church has one and the same faith everywhere in the world” (*Haer* I.10.33). As we saw in the previous chapter, that may have been Irenaeus’s ideal of what things should be, but it was far from actual reality. While Gnostic flights of wild fancy, in his view, were an irritant; they did not, in our view, make them “anathema.”

The claim of some gnostics that they had advanced in spiritual understanding beyond the apostles must have sounded to Irenaeus as sheer, unmitigated pride and arrogance.

They consider themselves “mature,” so that no one can be compared with them in the greatness of their *gnosis*, not even if you mention Peter or Paul or any of the other apostles. . . . They imagine that they themselves have discovered more than the apostles, and that the apostles preached the gospel still under the influence of Jewish opinions, but that they themselves are wise and more intelligent than the apostles. (*Haer.* I.13.6)

The problem of faith (*pistis*) versus knowledge (*gnosis*) was problematic for the Church Fathers. While Pauline theology prized “the word of knowledge” as a spiritual gift, there was a tendency to suspect a curiosity for the deeper truths, which delved into mysteries beyond the fundamentals of faith, as a source of spiritual pride. While love “builds up”, knowledge “puffs up” (1 Cor. 8:1). Disciples of Paul were suspicious of an esoteric knowledge that seems to engender a spiritual elitism. Jonas views Valentinus and his disciples as spiritual elitists. “The Valentinians regarded themselves as an elite of the knowing ones, the ‘pneumatics,’ divided by the very gulf of knowledge from the mass of the Christians of simple faith. . . .”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 206.

It seems clear that the Pauline School of disciples responsible for the Pastoral Epistles wrote them in the face of full-blown Gnosticism. They exhort Pauline Christians “not to occupy themselves with myths and endless genealogies that promote speculations rather than the divine training that is known by faith” (1 Tim. 1:4). Another example of their anti gnostic bias is: “Timothy, guard what has been entrusted to you. Avoid the profane chatter and contradictions of what is falsely called knowledge; by professing it some have missed the mark as regards the faith” (1 Tim. 6:20-21). Irenaeus used this same phrase in the title of his five volume work against heresy: *On the Detection and Refutation of the Knowledge Falsely So Called*.

The Pauline doctrine of justification by faith, spelled out so specifically in Romans (which much later became the clarion call of the Reformation); Irenaeus considered, in opposition to the gnostic emphasis upon knowledge, as the sole and sufficient means of salvation. He much preferred the simple faith of ordinary Christians to the complicated mythologies of gnostic teachers.

It is better if a man knows nothing and does not perceive a single cause of things created but abides in faith in God and in love, rather than that, puffed up by such knowledge (*scientia*, the root of our word science), he falls away from the love that makes man alive . . . and rather than that he falls into godlessness through the subtleties of his questioning and through hair-splitting. (*Haer.* II 26.1)

But do faith and knowledge have to be at cross-purposes with each other? Instead of being at sword's point, with a slight correction they can dovetail with each other. We find grounds for adjustment in the Petrine dictums: “add to your faith . . . knowledge” (2 Peter 1:5, KJV), and “grow in grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior. . .” (2 Peter 3:18). These can be complimenting rather than conflicting virtues which join hands in

leading a person farther along the path of discipleship. In the view of this project, so many of the problems orthodoxy had with heresy, and vice versa, with some mid-course corrections, could have been resolved more satisfactorily for the benefit of future generations of believers.

Another example of this is Irenaeus's judgmental attitude, which regarded Gnostics as completely lacking in virtue. Plotinus (ca. 205-270 C.E.), who was neither Jewish nor Christian, provides an independent source to the mistaken notion that gnostic Christians lacked a virtuous ethic. Although scholars are not sure what group, or groups, Plotinus had in mind he was certainly thinking of those with gnostic tendencies:

Yet those who already have the *gnosis* should start going after it here and now, and in their pursuit should first of all set right their conduct here below, as they come from a divine nature. . . . This, too, is evidence of their indifference to virtue, that they have never made any treatise about virtue, but have altogether left out the treatment of these subjects; they do not tell us what kind of thing virtue is...nor about all the many noble studies of the subject to be found in the treatises of the ancients. . . . (Plotinus, *Enneades*, II 9.15)

Irenaeus would have heartily agreed with this pagan author. When we read the gnostic texts, however, we frequently find an exalted ethic, which inspires the members to demonstrate their genuineness with good works. In good sermonic style, *The Gospel of Truth* was written not so much to communicate ideas as to inspire behavior. I found the emphasis on ethics in this tractate most refreshing:

Make firm the foot of those who have stumbled and stretch out your hands to those who are ill. Feed those who are hungry and give repose to those who are weary, and raise up those who wish to rise, and awaken those who sleep. For you are the understanding that is drawn forth. If strength acts thus, it becomes even stronger. . . . So you, do the will of the Father, for you are from him. (NHL I, 3. 33.1-30)

One should not get so overwhelmed by the esoteric maze of myth making so common to gnostic literature, as to lose sight of these edifying exhortations that are more frequent than one might think. As we continue to build our model for dialogue, we must keep in mind how easily the categorizations we impose on others can become clichés and caricatures.

Throughout his thought provoking book, Williams often warns of the danger of using categories which many have outlived their usefulness. One such oversimplification is what Williams calls the two option model. That is the presupposition that the kind of dualism one finds in gnostic sects can only lead to one of two extremes of ethical behavior, either asceticism or libertinism.

To condense so-called gnostic ethics to a string of clichés . . . is a mistake comparable to, say, reducing modern fundamentalist Christian ethics to the renunciation of cigarettes, alcohol, and gambling. The ethical agendas in the sources usually counted as “gnostic” manifest a far more subtle texture of concerns and endeavors on the part of persons with genuine interest in proper human behavior.<sup>2</sup>

It seems that in the heat of rhetoric and apologetic, the subtle texture of ethical concerns can suffer this kind of reductionism.

What may have troubled Irenaeus the most was the lack of discernment among the majority of believers, even in his own parish, to recognize the heretical elements in Valentinianism. Irenaeus complained that they used a lot of the same vocabulary, but with different meanings. “. . . their language resembles ours, while their sentiments are very different” (*Haer.* I.2.5). In the church they sounded orthodox, but in their private

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<sup>2</sup> Williams, 162.

meetings they deceived the gullible, as Irenaeus saw it, with the fascination of their esoteric speculations. Their meetings may have resembled schools of philosophy rather than a separate sect, thus making them harder to identify and isolate. There is little doubt that some of the most prominent members of Irenaeus's own congregation were drawn to these philosophical lectures led by some well-known scholar. To have a sizeable segment of his parish enamored by these dialogues on the "deeper" things must have been a thorn in the bishop's side.

Another source of irritation was the gnostic "boast that they possess more gospels than there really are" (*Haer.* 3.11.9). The foundation of orthodoxy for Irenaeus was "the four formed gospel." There could not be more or less than four. "Since there are four zones of the world in which we live, and four principal winds, . . . it fittingly has four pillars" (*Haer.* 3.8.77). Using the four faces of the cherubim (Ezek. 10:14, as interpreted by Rev. 4:7), a lion, ox, the face of a man, and a flying eagle: he goes to great lengths to "prove" that there has to be four and only four. It must have been tempting to regard Matthew, with its strong Jewish tone, as representing Jesus, "the lion of the tribe of Judah." The ox could represent Mark, with its emphasis upon Jesus as the strong servant of God. Luke, emphasizing the human elements of Jesus, would be the human face. And John, with its high-flying Christology, could be represented as the eagle. There you have it. Inspired, infallible proof that there can only be four Gospels. Professor Riley brings out in his lectures that there were about *eighty* Gospels circulating around the Mediterranean world of the second century that various communities of faith held in high esteem. How exasperating for this brilliant apologist. In the midst of these frustrations

one can almost hear the voice of his beloved mentor, Polycarp speaking: “O good God, for what sort of times have you preserved me, that I should put up with this” (Eusebius, *Church History* 5.20.4-8).

It is not the intent of this project to judge whether Irenaeus was correct or incorrect in his evaluation of the Valentinians. It is our intention to understand his assessment of what to him was heresy, so that we can gain insights that will lead to closer ecumenical ties. As we continue to build our model of reconciliation, as far as humanly possible, we would purge from it the agitations and irritations that plague the mind sets of those who have convinced themselves that their views are sanctioned by divine authority. Therefore, they are only listening long enough to win the right to tell others how it really is. In the heat of rhetoric one is tempted to confuse one’s analysis of something with the reality of the thing itself. Karen King, with a touch of humor, quotes from Trinh T. Minha, who sarcastically describes the universal human tendency to confuse “the finger pointing at the moon for the moon itself.”<sup>3</sup> So much of our judgmental finger pointing falls into this category.

Eusebius might have tolerated these areas of controversy had it not been for something more profound beneath the surface. As we delve deeper we may discover that orthodoxy and heresy were worlds apart in their understanding of the relationship of the divine and the human. When one holds them up in juxtaposition one can appreciate that they represent alternate kinds of Christianity. Orthodoxy was more objective and deductive, whereas Thomas Christianity was more subjective and inductive in its

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<sup>3</sup>King, *What Is Gnosticism?*, 20.

approach to theology. While “in itself the Thomas scripture shows no influence of the gnostic sect . . . it expresses a mystical concept of salvation . . . which is identical with one of the main Christian components in Valentinus’s revisionism.”<sup>4</sup>

According to Pagels, the secret of *gnosis* that sets it apart is: to know oneself, at the deepest level, is simultaneously to know God.<sup>5</sup> She quotes from Monoimus, another gnostic teacher:

Abandon the search for God and the creation and other matters of a similar sort. Look for him by taking *yourself* as the starting point. Learn who it is within you who makes everything his own and says, “My God, my mind, my thought, my soul, my body.” Learn the sources of sorrow, joy, love, hate. . . . If you carefully investigate these matters you will *find him in yourself*. (Hippolytus, *Refutation* 8.15.1-2, italics added)<sup>6</sup>

In the gnostic sense, theology tends to be the inductive process of self-discovery that is then projected onto the divine. This puts a much higher value on an intuitive process.

For orthodoxy, theology is much more a deductive process that finds its locus outside the self.

In Pagel’s excellent analysis of the essence of the orthodox mind, she points toward the inclination of separation in order to distill the essence of this phenomenon. Perhaps the classic biblical expression of this traditional mentality is: “For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, *separated from sinners*, and exalted above the heavens. *Unlike the other high priests...*” (Hebrews 7:26 f., italics added). In this view the *Christos* (anointed one) of orthodoxy was “unlike the

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<sup>4</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, xvi.

<sup>5</sup> Elaine Pagels, *Beyond Belief: The Secret Gospel of Thomas* (New York: Random House, 2003), xix.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, xix-xx.



others” in a class by himself. As the Creed of Nicaea in 325 would later affirm, “Jesus is only-begotten” (*monogenes*, a Greek word meaning unique, one and only) “but not made.” As the unique Son of God, in a way no one else could be, he was “separate from sinners.” Because Adam fell into sin (Augustine would later develop this into the doctrine of original sin) humanity has deprived itself of any capacity to achieve its own salvation. While not totally obliterated, the *imago dei* (image of God) in humankind has been incapacitated to the extent that salvation must be a gift of grace. Therefore revelation is not something that can emerge from the human psyche; it must break in from above and beyond humanity’s capacity to know.

Instead of sin and salvation, Thomas Christianity was more apt to speak of ignorance and escape. It preferred illusion and enlightenment to repentance and faith. Instead of faith in a unique Son of God, the *Gospel of Thomas* was more inclined to speak of an “acquaintance” (Layton’s favorite translation for *gnosis*) of Jesus, as one’s spiritual guide, to lead us to become Christs. We find a classic statement in the prologue of these “secret sayings, which the *living Jesus* [in contrast with the dead Jesus of orthodoxy] spoke and which Didymos Judas Thomas wrote down” (*NHL* II 32.1-2, italics added). Pagel uses a translation from Professor MacRae which she finds more lucid: “Jesus said: ‘If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you what you do not bring forth will destroy you.’”<sup>7</sup> Thomas Lambdin, who translates the *Gospel of Thomas* in *The Nag Hammadi Library*, general editor James M. Robinson, renders it:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

When you come to know yourselves, then you will become known, and you will realize that it is you who are the sons of the living father. But if you will not know yourselves, you dwell in poverty and it is you who are that poverty. (*NHL* II, 32. 26 and 33. 1-5)

To Irenaeus, and other heresiologists, this may have sounded like people are, in gnostic soteriology, saved by nature rather than by supernatural grace. An individual has everything needed for salvation already locked up in herself, if she is of the elect. All she need do is actualize her own innate spiritual resources. This minimizing of divine grace and maximizing of human potential was another flash point that ignited fires of controversy.

The *gnosis* recommended by the “living Jesus” in the prologue of the *Gospel of Thomas* is something more than rational. Like the distinction in German between *wissen* (to know about something or someone objectively) and *kennen* (to know something or someone experientially through personal acquaintance): this intuitive knowledge that is both the means and the goal of salvation, is not something “outside of you.”<sup>8</sup> This “kingdom” of self-discovery is within and is accessible to those who seek. “Jesus said, ‘Let him who seeks continue seeking until he finds.’”<sup>9</sup> The main focus, therefore, is not just upon believing as the *psychics* (those common Christians who recite the creed, submit to the authority of the bishop, and participate in the liturgy) do, often without knowing why. The major thrust is upon seeking until enlightenment emerges from within and lifts the *pneumatic* to a higher level of self-awareness. In either translation it seems clear that revelation is not something that breaks in from without, from a supernatural

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

source. Revelation is something that emerges from within the *psyche* (soul) as one brings the *gnosis* from within ones self to the surface.

In the book of *Thomas the Contender*, the seventh and last treatise of codex two of the Nag Hammadi library, which purports to be a revelation dialogue between Jesus and Thomas, during the time between the resurrection and the ascension; we have a similar emphasis:

Now since it has been said that you are my twin and true companion, examine yourself and learn who you are . . . it is not fitting that you be ignorant of yourself . . . you will be called ‘the one who knows himself.’ For he who has not known himself has known nothing, but he who has known himself has at the same time already achieved knowledge about the depth of the all. (*NHL* II, 7. 138.7-18)

I think we can see that the rational approach of orthodoxy that tried to incarnate saving truth in authoritative creedal formulas is now challenged by a mystical approach that is more open to myth and allegory. In this light we can better understand how this other version of Christianity, which thrived from ca. 80-200 C.E., was perceived as a threat by orthodox bishops.

As one travels this path of the *pneumatikoi* (those endowed by the spirit) and the *teleioi* (those who have attained the maturity of completeness) a radical transformation may occur. In a passage that parallels the confession of Peter in Matthew sixteen: “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God,” Jesus asks a similar question to his disciples in the Gospel of Thomas that was asked in the canonical Gospel:

Jesus said to his disciples, “Compare me to someone and tell me whom I am like.” Simon Peter said to him, “You are like a righteous angel” [reflecting an angel Christology that was familiar to Jewish Christians]. Matthew said to him, “You are like a wise philosopher.” Thomas said to him, “Master, my mouth is wholly incapable of saying whom you are like.” Jesus said, “I am *not* your

master. Because you have drunk, you have become intoxicated from the bubbling spring which I have measured out.” (*NHL* II, 2 34.30-35.7, italics added)

Jesus refuses to be their Master. Rather, he would bridge the gulf of separation and become their identical twin or double. Layton sees this as a metaphor, which becomes a paradigm of salvation. “This relationship provided a profound theological model for the reciprocal relationship of the individual Christian and the inner divine light or ‘living Jesus’: to know oneself was to know one’s divine double and thence to know god.”<sup>10</sup> Pagel gives this a symbolic interpretation in suggesting we all become Didymus (the Greek word for twin) and Thomas (the Aramaic word for twin) as we drink “from the bubbling spring.” “Jesus said, ‘He who will drink from my mouth will become like me. I myself shall become he, and the things that are hidden will be revealed to him’” (*NHL* 50.28-30). The “obscure” saying: “Blessed is the lion that the human being will devour so that the lion becomes human. . . .” (*The Gospel of Thomas* 33.23, trans. B. Layton), may mean: by internalizing the “living Jesus” through *gnosis*, he becomes what we are and we become what he is. To become Jesus’ identical twin, and not just his servant, involves an intimacy of relationship that would be repugnant to a second century, traditional mind steeped in orthodoxy. I think here was the fatal flaw, which disqualified many Gnostic believers, in Irenaeus’s view, from fellowship in the apostolic church.

The spirit of Gnosticism is as different from Irenaeus as the East is from the West. In light of a tradition that places Thomas in India for much of his ministry (even today there is a group of Thomas Christians in India that take him as their founding apostle), one can not help wonder to what degree this branch of Christianity was influenced by

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 359.

Buddhism, which originated in the sixth century B.C.E. Also we can observe the close correspondence between many of these concepts, which were abhorrent to the apologists, and psychotherapy. That may be a reason why Carl G. Jung was so enamored with gnostic literature and purchased the five tractates of codex one (known as the Jung codex) for his museum: because he saw gnostic ideology as another side of the unconscious mind.

Can we build a model expansive enough to take in the East and the West, the worlds of theology and psychotherapy? Can we create a *Carmen Christi* (Hymn of Christ, Phil. 2:6-11) that Paul inherited from a previous generation of believers, which can be sung by “orthodox” and “heretic” alike, because it is inclusive enough in its language to break down barriers and build bridges of understanding? “Jesus took only on the ‘form,’ ‘likeness,’ and ‘appearance’ ... of a man, words which gave at least license, if not mandate, to anyone who wished to deny to Jesus human flesh on either side of the grave.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, those who subscribed to an incarnational theology could join in the chorus. It is the position of this project that with serious effort we can obliterate boundaries and open doors to fresh breezes of *koinonia* (“close association involving mutual interests and sharing”).<sup>12</sup>

One could speculate why the orthodox mentality, as modeled by Irenaeus, needs to posit, “a great gulf fixed” (Luke 16:26, KJV) between a holy deity and sinful

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<sup>11</sup> Gregory J. Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered: Thomas and John in Controversy* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 106.

<sup>12</sup> Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., revised and edited by Frederick William Danker (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 552.

humanity. It seems to reflect the Hebrew culture we find running through the Old Testament. Professor Riley has observed that one of the major distinctions between the culture of the Hebrew Bible and Hellenistic culture was the gap between the divine and human spheres of action.<sup>13</sup> In Judaism God is above the fray, holy and just, and wrathful against the flaws of creation. In Greek mythology the gods share human tendencies toward the imperfection of moral failure, and often walk disguised among us. One never knows when one might encounter a god in human form. The great heroes of Greek epic were often regarded as *hemitheoi* (half human and half divine). It could be argued that Gnosticism shared more the immanence of Greek culture and Platonic philosophy that, at times, verged on pantheism. “It is I who am the all. From me did the all come forth, and unto me did the all extend. Split a piece of wood and I am there. Lift up the stone, and you will find me there” (*NHL* II, 2.46.24-28). The orthodox branch of the church, in general, shared more in the absolute separation of creator and creation.

Another way to get a handle on the complex interactions going on between “orthodoxy” and “heresy” is to view it as a classic struggle between “order” and “prophesy.” Throughout the history of the Common Era, the pendulum has tended to swing between these two polarities. One could argue that in the spirituality of Jesus the pendulum is swinging toward the spontaneity of inspiration. “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. . . . (Luke 4:18). In Pauline spirituality there is an attempt to hold thesis and antithesis in some kind of creative tension. In one breath, Paul’s guidance to the church in Corinth is “be eager to

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<sup>13</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 18.

prophecy, and do not forbid speaking in *glossolalia*” (an ecstatic speech regarded as a spirit inspired utterance). In the next breath he says, “all things should be done decently and in order” (1 Cor. 14:39-40).

In the fourth century, with the growth of institutional Christianity, the pendulum is swinging in the direction of a set liturgy, a standardized canon; bishops, priests, deacons, and laity with their roles clearly delineated, discouraging innovation. As the institutional church, and the sacramental functions of the priest become essential for salvation, charismatic gifts are scarcer and fringe groups that emphasize individual creativity are more and more marginalized. Because the center of gravity has shifted so far in the direction of organized religion, which majors on decency and order, this project recommends a model that allows more freedom for the “movement of the spirit.”

With a broad brush we might offer the following generalization: The position of orthodoxy often emphasized survival through solidarity. In a world beset by unfriendly, pagan culture, where fires of persecution can ignite and threaten our existence—we need to present a united front to the world. We must have the strength of unity so that we can survive in a hostile environment. Thomas Christians did not share such a vested interest in the institutional church with its episcopal hierarchy. Their interest was not to control but enhance creativity, even if it meant running the risk of division and even schism. That risk must be accepted in the interest of every person finding her own path to ascend from whence she came.

It might also be said that Roman Christianity was geared for the masses. Its empowering vision was for one universal church that would conform to one “rule of

faith,” and one common creed. This vision may have enabled it to survive. As the wise man says: “without vision a people perish” (Prov. 29:18, KJV). It could be argued that the early church would not have survived without its vision of a “true” apostolic, universal church embodied in a central, hierarchical structure. Be that as it may, this gave birth to a need to revise history, as seen in the myths of an Apostles’ Creed, and an unbroken chain of apostolic succession, dealt with in the previous chapter.

In contrast, Gnosticism was geared to the few who were organized from the bottom up rather than the top down. As Pagels brings out in *The Gnostic Paul: Gnostic Exegesis of the Pauline Letters*, exegetes like Heracleon, Theodotus, and Ptolemy consistently focused on the Jesus saying: “many are called but few are chosen” (Matt. 22:14). From their perspective, the many called were the *psychics* (those simple minded believers who knew only the *kerygma*). The chosen few were the *pneumatics* that had reached a higher state of knowledge. Jesus saying number 23 in *The Gospel of Thomas* further amplifies this: “Jesus said, ‘I shall choose you, one out of a thousand, and two out of ten thousand, and they shall stand as a single one’” (NHL II, 2. 38.1). With this vision of the elect, positions of leadership were not granted by the authority of a bishop but by the demonstration of spiritual gifts that tended to be without gender bias. Thus gifted women could have important positions of leadership in a house-church setting. Will it be the conformation of the masses or the transformation of the remnant?

These two streams seem to be veering off from one another. Can they flow along parallel to each other? Can we have, in the words of Professor Riley, “one Jesus and



many Christs?” Can these religious experiences that inspire alternate kinds of Christianity, flow together in the same “river of God”?

This project views Valentinus as a reformer of gnostic belief systems, who used his eloquence to attempt to build bridges of understanding between the various branches of the church and the Hellenistic world. The problem with this position is that it leaves one vulnerable. From the side of the heresiologists the views of Valentinus smacked too much of Greek philosophy. Hippolytus complained, “the opinions propounded by Valentinus are not constructed out of Scriptures, but out of Platonic and Pythagorean tenets” (Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, VI, introduction).

A good example of these Hellenizing tendencies is found in *The Authenticos Logos* (“The Authoritative Teaching”). There is a clear distinction made between the *psychē logikē* (rational soul), *psychē pneumatikē* (spiritual soul), and *psychē hylikē* (material soul). According to Broek, this distinction shows that this tractate is a “document of Christian Platonism.”<sup>14</sup> He views this tractate as “characterized by a great openness for Platonic and Neopythagorean ideas on God and the soul, which apparently were thought to be wholly compatible with Christian belief.”<sup>15</sup> This melding of Christianity and Platonic philosophy many heresiologists would have considered a fatal flaw. Our model of reconciliation affirms as a positive virtue any interpretation of Christianity, which makes it more meaningful to secular culture.

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<sup>14</sup> R. van den Broek, “*The Authenticos Logos*: A New Document of Christian Platonism,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 33 (1979): 260-86.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

On the other hand, Sethian Gnostics might have complained that there was too much canonical scripture and not enough classic gnostic teaching. This put the Valentinians in the unenviable position of being shot at from both sides. The role of the reconciler often puts one in that position. In spite of our vulnerability, we can still learn from Valentinus how we may break down the barriers of communication that afflict our contemporary situation. If Valentinians were trying to hold together in dynamic tension what one might call proto orthodoxy and heterodoxy, they would be a good role model for us.

Valentinus revised classic gnostic tradition in the light of another, quite different form of Christianity . . . the School of St. Thomas; consciously adopting some of the language of the New Testament and stamping the result with his own rhetorical genius.<sup>16</sup>

The probable impact of Thomas Christianity upon Valentinus accounts for its inclusion in this chapter.

It appears that well into the second century Valentinian Christians were still embedded as cells in the church at large. According to Bentley Layton they functioned on two levels. On one level “they accepted a traditional Roman formulation of correct belief, but by means of allegorical interpretation they discovered also a ‘deeper’ meaning within it. . . .”<sup>17</sup> They seem to be saying: why can’t we make room for believers who come into the church on one level but who may graduate to another level of enlightenment? Why can’t we all begin with the canon and the creed; confessing the same apostolic faith, celebrating the same sacraments of baptism and the Eucharist—but

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<sup>16</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, xv.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 220.

still allow freedom to the few who want to advance beyond the fundamentals, to go on to “perfection?” Thus they would attend the regular masses and, in addition, have private meetings in homes. This attempt to maintain the unity of the faith by creating space for the majority who were content to simply believe without question: and permitting a second level of membership that allowed the minority to explore a deeper knowledge; while unsuccessful, presents some possibilities for contemporary ministry. The danger, of course, is to develop first and second class Christians, which may breed an elitist spirit. But with this danger uppermost in view, there needs to be freedom for believers to find their own levels. Our model of inclusion supports such freedom.

It has been observed by various scholars that Valentinians tried hard to modify some of the more toxic branches of Gnosticism that were repugnant to orthodox bishops. For instance, in the *Tripartite Tractate* that may have been written by Heracleon, instead of a primal male/female dyad, there is a strong emphasis on a monadic first principle (NHL, 58). In a way similar to the introduction of the *Apocryphon of John*, a *via negativa* is employed to exult divine transcendence in a powerfully eloquent manner. Instead of a complicated pleroma (fullness of deity) it postulates the Son and the Church emanating from the Father. This initial trinity may have been a revision of Valentinian views in “response to the criticism of orthodox theologians such as Irenaeus . . . .” (58)

The Pauline school of “one God and Father,” “one Lord,” and “one Sprit,” (Eph. 4:3-6) provides us another overlap between the proto-orthodox church and the Valentinians. The essential contribution Valentinus and his followers made to the evolving theology of Trinitarianism is well known. He and those schools of Gnosticism

inspired by him, provided the language, which gave a forward impetus to Trinitarian thought.

Valentinus, the leader of a sect, was the first to devise the notion of three subsistent entities (hypostases), in a work that he entitled *On the Three natures*. For, he devised the notion of three subsistent entities and three persons—father, son, and holy spirit.<sup>18</sup>

This demonstrates how deft the imperial church was in borrowing from gnostic thought with one hand, while rejecting them with the other.

The nascent Trinitarianism of the Valentinians was more than intellectual speculation that evolved from Platonic cosmological theory. It mythologized the way they experienced the divine. As Father of all, they knew God as transcendent and ineffable. As *Christos* they knew the immanence of the Gnostic Redeemer who had broken through the barrier of the fixed stars and the planetary spheres. Returning from whence he came, he provided an escape for those who experience the enlightenment of salvation. As spirit they knew a mystical indwelling of the divine that could accompany them on their journey home. This was a theology that was forged on the anvil of religious experience. That's what makes it such a useful model in developing a strategy of integration. In the next chapter we will argue that it is in the crucible of the experiential that a melting and a melding can occur.

Their willingness to compromise and harmonize in order to find fellowship in the church at large, perhaps accounts for their surprise at being labeled heretics.

They ask, when they confess the same things and participate in the same worship . . . how is it that we, for no reason, remain aloof from them; and how is it that

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<sup>18</sup> Fragment B, quoted in Bentley Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 233.

when they confess the same things, and hold the same doctrines, we call them heretics! (*Haer.* III.15.2)

I would have wondered about that myself. They also quoted from the same canonical scriptures. Layton describes the *Gospel of Truth* as the “earliest surviving sermon of Christian mysticism.”<sup>19</sup> He highly regards it as “one of the most brilliantly crafted works of ancient Christian literature” and, in its original Greek, having “a rhetorical power that ranked with the great masterpieces of Christian prose.”<sup>20</sup> In this devotional sermon, Valentinus alludes to the Fourth Gospel at least fourteen different times. It could be argued that he and his followers were intent on finding a home in the “Great Church,” where they could work to bring Platonic philosophies and Hellenistic culture into closer proximity to Roman Christianity. For those of us who find it sometimes difficult to function in certain expressions of organized religion, we can learn from the Valentinian perspective.

While some forms of gnosticism denied that Jesus actually died, the *Gospel of Truth* makes the crucifixion central to the plan of salvation. “He was nailed to a tree and become fruit of the father’s acquaintance . . . to those who ate of it, it gave the possibility that whoever he discovered within himself might be joyful in the discovery of him (*NHL* 1.18.28-30, trans. B. Layton). These indications suggest that the Valentinian School was endeavoring to function within, and contribute to, the universal church. Two millennia later, we can adopt this same strategy, hopefully with greater success.

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<sup>19</sup> Layton, *Gnostic Scriptures*, 250.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

As Bultmann observed so clearly: there is a two-fold process going on, the gnosticising of Christianity and the Christianizing of Gnosticism. We see this double-edged phenomenon at work when we put two Nag Hammadi tractates side by side: *Eugnostos the Blessed* (NHL III,3 and V,1) and *The Sophia of Jesus Christ* (III, 4 and BG 8502,3). The former lacks any apparent Christian influence. The later was produced by a Christian gnostic redactor who used *Eugnostos*, almost in its entirety, transforming it into a thoroughly Christian oriented gnostic document. Parrot asks: what did the anonymous editor have in mind? Was he trying to persuade the non-Christian gnostics that Christ was the fulfillment of the gnostic redeemer myth? Or was he trying to reach the non-gnostic Christians that their Savior is best understood as the source of Gnosticism (NHL, 220)? It is likely that the editor had both groups in mind. At any rate a parallel comparison of the two tractates suggest that a dynamic process was going on which we must not loose sight of in our intrachurch dialogues. The model of reconciliation that this project advocates is open on all sides (indeed there are no sides, only a center) and resistant to anything static.

Our model reflects a symbiotic rather than a parasitic relationship. Some scholars hold the view that mainstream Christianity is the host and Gnosticism is the parasite, which feeds upon it. Our model reflects a symbiotic relationship, which is beneficial to both parties. It is this syncretistic creative melding, which provides a model of hopefulness that these tributaries of tradition can flow together in mutual enrichment. Armed with this hope, perhaps we can run the risk of making ourselves more open to conflicting theologies.

One of the features of our model of reconciliation must be vulnerability. Jesus' metaphor of the grain of wheat falling to the ground and dying in order to bring forth much fruit (John 12:24) is an essential for building our relational pattern. As long as we are invulnerable, building layers of insulation around our brand of religion, we "will abide alone." We must be willing to die to our need to define and discover ourselves.

The unwritten and often unconscious strategy of the polemicists was to establish the boundaries of normative Christianity. With clear insight, King brings out that even deeper than the need to persuade was the greater need for "internal self-definition."<sup>21</sup> King goes so far as to postulate that the strategies of the polemicists "were devised not in the face of a clear external enemy, but to deal with an internal crisis of differentiation."<sup>22</sup> Like nations sometimes go to war to unify the country around a common cause, and clarify disputed boundaries, so the "defenders of the faith" went to war with "heresy" and "heretics" in order to consolidate their power base and clarify boundaries that in practice were none too clear. The "champions of orthodoxy" were not interested in hearing and understanding but in winning. And win they did as the publication and preservation of their work eloquently attests. The apologists were more than willing to use what "Gnosticism" (although they never employed this term) was in order to show what they were not. Our growing model of integration must abandon this military metaphor of victory and replace it with the biological model of symbiosis.

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<sup>21</sup> King, *What Is Gnosticism?* 21.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

## CHAPTER 4

## “A MORE EXCELLENT WAY”

In chapters twelve and fourteen of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul gives useful and practical guidance on the operation of the *charismata* in the local assembly. These gifts are powerful, when used correctly, in building up the body of Christ. Nestled between these two chapters, almost like a buffer zone, is the famous love chapter that exalts *agape* (a divine love that is selfless and sacrificial) as the crowning virtue. None of the spiritual gifts operate effectively without this lubricant of love. Without this buffer the gifts of the spirit tend to agitate and irritate like “a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal” (1 Cor. 13:1). The tone sounded by Paul is what we are striving for in this project. Do everything “for the common good” (12:7). “Strive for the spiritual gifts” (14:1), especially for the gift of prophesy, because of its value in edifying the body of believers; but “pursue love” (14:1), make it your aim and ambition. As useful as the “gifts of the spirit” are, “the fruit of the Spirit,” whose nine-fold cluster is headed by “love,” (Gal. 5:22) is what Paul has in mind when he says: “And I will show you a still more excellent way” (12:31). In light of this “better way” the power politics of exclusion played by the polemicists, and the tendencies toward spiritual elitism played by some Gnostic schools, must be purged from our model of reconciliation.

There is a moving scene depicted in the apocryphal book, the *Acts of John* (discovered in Egypt about 50 years before Nag Hammadi) that is often referred to as the “Round Dance of the Cross.” In words that echo the Fourth Gospel, the anonymous



author (probably a disciple of Valentinus, writing in the second half of the second century) boldly adds this event to John's account of the night before the crucifixion:

Before he was arrested . . . he gathered us all together, and said, 'Before I am delivered up to them, let us sing a hymn to the Father, and go forth to what lies before us.' So he commanded us to make a circle, holding one another's hands, and he himself stood in the middle. He said, 'Respond Amen to me.' (*Acts of John* 94.1-4, trans. J. K. Elliott)

As the disciples encircled their Lord in the dance, Jesus led them in this antiphonal chant, like a litany with recitation and response:

'Glory be to you, Father!' And we, circling him, said, 'Amen.'  
 'Glory be to you, Word! Glory be to you, Grace!' 'Amen.'  
 'Glory be to you, Spirit! Glory be to you, Holy One!' 'Amen.'  
 'We praise you, O Father. We give thanks to you, light, in whom darkness does not abide.' 'Amen.'  
 'I will pipe, dance all of you!' 'Amen.' 'The whole universe takes part in the dancing.' 'Amen.' 'He who does not dance, does not know what is being done.' 'Amen.' 'I am a lamp to you who see me.' 'Amen.'  
 'I am a mirror to you who perceive.' 'Amen.'  
 'I am a door to you who knock on me.' 'Amen.'  
 'I am a way to you, wayfarer.' 'Amen.' (*Acts of John* 94:1-4)

The scene fires the imagination as one pictures the disciples with clasped hands moving in rhythm to this cosmic dance in order to participate in "the whole universe."

From this moving account we find a strong suggestion that instead of doctrinal formulations or intellectual speculations, a "more excellent way" may be the communal experience of spiritual celebration. The celebration of worship may bind diverse communities together with ties that are not easily broken. By connecting cords that draw the circles of orthodoxy and heresy closer together in worship, we find that in spite of different centers their circumferences may overlap in the mystical realm of the experiential. This realm of being "in Christ," to use Paul's favorite formula, holds the

best hope of finding common ground.

By way of anecdote: I will never forget a Communion service in a charismatic Roman Catholic group. I was in my military uniform. The leaders could see the crosses on my lapel and know I was a chaplain. I was invited to assist in the celebrating of the Eucharist. I informed them that I was a Protestant chaplain. Still they included me in a circle around the altar. As we sang guitar choruses and passed the elements in a circular pattern, I was caught up in the celebration. With full awareness that my memorial views of the bread and wine, and their sacramental views were profoundly different, yet I felt a part of them as we worshipped the same Christ and sensed the same Holy Spirit in our midst. Could this be a better way that transcends theological interpretations? Doctrinal definitions slip into the background as we experience the mystery of divine transcendence. In the words of the Round Dance, "Glory to you Father." The diverse communities of faith sprinkled throughout the Mediterranean world could all say, "amen" to this.

So many Native American tribes that exhibit an amazing degree of spirituality would say, *hetchetu aloh* (a Lakota phrase which means "so it is") and would join us in the dance. Among their many rituals is the ghost dance. It was danced to renew the eschatological hope of the Oglala Sioux people. In 1890, as John G. Neihardt reports in his interviews with Nicholas Black Elk (1863-1950), a famous visionary and healer: a Messiah figure (*Wanekia*) arose in 1890 who was said to be "the son of the Great Spirit."<sup>1</sup> According to the story he came to the *Wasichus* (white settlers) the first time but they had

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<sup>1</sup> Black Elk, *Black Elk Speaks* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1979), 181 ff.

killed him. Now he had come again just to the Indians. A new world would come with a cloud, after another winter, and usher in a new day where Bison would roam in abundance and all their dead relatives would return to life. They would live in peace in their tepees far removed from the lies of the Wasichus. By dancing the ghost dance, they believed, the tribes could hasten the fulfillment of this dream. This great hope was followed by tragic disillusionment in the slaughter at Wounded Knee, on 29 December, 1890.

It could be argued that Black Elk was seduced from his own vision by this apocalyptic hope that proved a disaster to his people. Be that as it may, we see in the ceremonial dances of Native Americans a reflection of the Round Dance. The point is: the cosmic rhythm goes on. Whether reclining at a table, or sitting crossed legged in a tepee: whether passing bread and wine or a peace pipe, the Great Spirit still dances in the hearts of people be they red or yellow, black or white. It is this sense of solidarity, which must be built into our model of reconciliation.

No matter how often our dreams for renewal are dashed to pieces, this is still our Father's world (or Grand Fathers', as the Sioux were apt to say). In the words of one of our classic hymns: "This is my Father's world, and to my listening ears all nature sings, and round me rings the music of the spheres" (words by Maltbie D. Babcock, music by Franklin L. Sheppard). "The morning stars sang together, and all the sons of God shouted for joy" (Job 38:7). Science speculates that everything in our world is made of stardust. This project speculates that every child of God has the rhythm of creation

beating in her breast. Our Super Star invites us to join in the dance and experience the essential oneness of our spiritual quests.

The *Apocryphon* ("Secret Gospel") of John begins with a statement of divine transcendence, which has been heavily influenced by Platonic philosophy (see the *Timaeus*). Jonas sees this universal emphasis, within the big tent of gnostic speculation, to exalt the Monad to transmundane status, as a "radical revaluation" intent on depreciating the idea of cosmic order and beauty so revered by platonic philosophy. "All the plus value that Hellenistic culture assigned to the cosmos is now transferred to a transmundane God who is above the diabolical task of creation."<sup>2</sup> Instead of Plato's inclination to maintain strict silence on the Monad and invest the cosmos with the highest dignity, most schools of Gnosticism would reverse this. They would replace the good Demiurge of Plato with a flawed Yaldabaoth, which is responsible for this chaotic cosmos ruled by the dark forces of Archons. Thus the universe that was regarded by Plato as the perfect exemplar of order and beauty is radically revaluated. All the piety that was directed toward it is now channeled to the Monad. Such a radical shift is so exalted in scope and uplifting in spirit that it easily becomes a partner in the dance.

A *via negativa* is employed to lift the soul to transcendent heights. No matter how we may describe deity in the positive sense, the transcendent One is something indescribably more excellent than that. Truly such a Monad is "the more excellent way" because no earthly category can contain deity or do justice to the divine nature.

[And when I] asked to [know it he said] to me, The Monad [is a] monarchy with nothing above it. It is [he who] exists as [God] and Father of everything, [the

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<sup>2</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 250.

invisible one] who is above [everything, who is] imperishability, existing [as] pure light which no [eye] can behold. He [is the] invisible [Spirit]; it is not right [to think] about him as a god, or something similar. For he is more than a god, since there is no one above him, nor does anyone lord it over him. [He exists] in nothing inferior, [for everything] exists in him;.... He is [illimitable] because there is no one [prior to him to] limit him.

He is unsearchable...immeasurable...invisible...eternal...[ineffable because] no one could comprehend him to speak [about him]. He is unnamable because [there is no one prior to him] to name him.... For the [perfect one] is majestic; he is pure and immeasurable [greatness]. He is aeon-giving Aeon, [life]-giving Life, a blessedness-giving Blessed One, knowledge-giving Knowledge, goodness giving Goodness, mercy and redemption-giving Mercy, grace-giving Grace, not because he possesses it, but because he gives immeasurable and incomprehensible [light]. (NHL II 2.26-4.10, trans. G. Riley)

Line after line; this inspiring flight may transport one into a transcendent realm that is purged of anthropomorphic conceptions of a jealous God who strives for land and needs something from man.

Professor Riley observes that this example of apophatic theology leaves one asking: what then was the incentive for creation? If the Monad wanted and needed nothing, where was the motivation to create anything beyond the perfect fullness of its own Being? After a *via negativa* that describes what the Monad is not, the section closes with a positive statement of what the Monad is. Insightfully, Riley brings together *apophasis* (Greek for “saying no”) with the Platonic “Good” to explain the creative instinct. The incentive behind creation is the nature of the Monad itself, which bubbles over with life-giving Life.<sup>3</sup> Instead of needing anything from man, the Monad overflows with everything toward man. It is this abundant surplus that accounts for the mystery of how the one became many, a philosophical question, which engaged the best minds of later antiquity. The Gnostic answer for the creative urge is: the eternal geyser of

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<sup>3</sup> Riley, *River of God*, 44.

ultimate goodness, which flows out from the “ineffable” in an endless stream of devolving emanations. This selfless giving, which is not possessive, mirrors the ideals of *agape*, and must become a prominent feature in our model of reconciliation.

According to Frederik Wisse, who writes the introduction to *The Apocryphon of John*, the two basic questions dealt with in this Secret Gospel are the origin of evil and how can we escape from this evil world to our heavenly home?<sup>4</sup> These were vexing question with which every belief system had to wrestle. The answer, for some schools of Gnosticism, was to exalt the Monad high above anthropomorphic concepts of God, and then to create space between the “goodness” of the High God and the mere “justice” of the god of creation. Perhaps as a rebellion of Hellenized Jews against the officialdom of Hebrew Judaism, they associated the god of the Old Testament not with the Monad but with *Yaldabaoth*, a flawed Demiurge (from the Greek *demiourgos* “skilled workman or craftsman”), son of a fallen *Sophia* (“wisdom”) who went forth on her own without the cooperation of her consort, to create this “monster.” What is wrong with this world can be attributed not to the Monad but to this flawed emanation. Ultimately they were saying that the world was not created by God, but by Satan. That is one way to deal with the problem of evil. If successful, it would have cut the cord of our highly prized Judeo-Christian tradition.

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<sup>4</sup> Frederik Wisse, *The Apocryphon of John* in *The Nag Hammadi Library in English*, ed. John M. Robinson, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1988), 104.

In a recent lecture,<sup>5</sup> Professor Riley brought out that all the various communities of faith were struggling with the God of the Old Testament, to transcend the element of jealousy and capriciousness in an anthropomorphized conception of God. Philo, a Jewish philosopher in the middle of the first century resorted to allegory. By allegorizing the early chapters in Genesis, he was able to make *Yahweh* more understandable to Hellenized Jews and Gentiles. By using symbols and metaphors, he was able to show parallels between Greek philosophy and Hebrew monotheism and thus avoid an irreparable breach.

In like manner the Apostle Paul did not wish to abandon entirely his Jewish roots. Like Luther, he was inclined to say that the New is in the Old concealed, and the Old is in the New revealed. In other words: we didn't really know what *Adonai* was like until the *Huios Theou* came and revealed him in fullness. Going in a different direction, the creativity of the *Apocryphon of John* is engaged in a highly mythological attempt to face the problem of evil by differentiating between the god of the Old Testament and the Monad of Greek philosophy. I am fascinated by such an approach but I can't agree with its conclusion. I can agree with this: as the ecumenist commits to the Monad of the *Apocryphon of John*, purged of all anthropomorphic conceptions, and parallel with the spirituality of Jesus, she has a powerful paradigm that can enhance dialogue with all people of faith. All those who are wrestling with the problem of evil, should find room under our big tent.

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<sup>5</sup> Riley, New Testament 387, "Spirituality and Worship," Sept. 9, 2003, Claremont School of Theology.

The other basic issue is how do we escape this world, equipped by *gnosis*, to return to the Monad from whence we came? This is a burning question that may have challenged the best minds of the second century. This project regards the “journey of the soul” as an overarching myth bridging the disparate worlds of “Greek and barbarian,” “Jew and Gentile”: and in the Gnostic world, *pneumatic* and *psychic*. As such it deserves a prominent place in our model of reconciliation. Jonas regards the ascent of the soul, the final phase of this mythical journey, as one of the universal threads which is woven throughout the whole tapestry of gnostic literature:

The celestial journey of the returning soul is indeed one of the most constant common features in otherwise widely divergent systems, and its significance for the gnostic mind is enhanced by the fact that it represents a belief not only essential in gnostic theory and expectation . . . but of immediate practical importance to the gnostic believer, since the meaning of gnosis is to prepare for this final event, and all its ethical ritual, and technical instruction is meant to secure its successful completion.<sup>6</sup>

What happens in microcosm in the ascent of the soul happens in macrocosm in the elevation of the Monad as a totally transcendent Being that is beyond description or comprehension. This is a second universal strand in the complex divergence of gnostic thought which must also be woven into our model of reconciliation. For believers, these spiritualized descriptions of what deity is not are more than concepts to be understood by the mind. They are perceived as intellectual constructs of spiritual realities, which are to be celebrated by the worshipful heart and experienced in communal life. Beneath the surface of conceptual diversity is a depth of common spirituality, which inspired the people even to martyrdom.

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<sup>6</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 165.



When we think of martyrs we often remember people like Clement of Rome, the elderly Polycarp of Smyrna, Justin of Caesarea, and Ignatius of Salamis. These are all inspiring examples from the ecclesiastically oriented expression of Christianity. But the sources suggest that many of the heretical sects produced their fair share of martyrs.

“There were, moreover, more martyrs from among the Marcionites, the Montanists, and other heretical groups than orthodoxy would like to admit. . . .”<sup>7</sup> This core of idealism, which inspired its devotees to give their lives for their faith is where we will find the gap narrowing between orthodoxy and heresy. Between these overlapping circles of doctrinal formulation and philosophical speculation there is a common area, which we are identifying as spiritual celebration. It is in this area of overlapping circumferences that we find those mystic experiences that can transform ordinary people into fearless martyrs. These are the areas we should explore in order “to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). In Pauline theology this spiritual unity is not something we create by human effort. Rather it is something we “maintain” by celebrating that “body” of common experiences that bind us to the mystery of “one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all” (4:5). As Tertullian said, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church. Under the surface, the same blood flows through the veins of both the orthodox and the heterodox.

In addition to the Round Dance in the *Acts of John*, and the exaltation of divine transcendence in the *Apocryphon of John*, the myth of redemption celebrated in *The Hymn of the Pearl* was a better way for gnostic speculation and the church at large to

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<sup>7</sup> Bauer, 91.

reach across a great divide. The last line of the Round Dance says: “I am a way to you, wayfarer.” This mysterious journey from birth, through life, to death is one aspect of human experience, which pulls us together like a common cord. *The Hymn of the Pearl* is a folktale that is incorporated in *The Acts of Thomas* (ch.108-113), which artistically paints the myth of salvation upon the canvas of the imagination.

Klijn preferred to entitle *The Hymn of the Pearl* “The Hymn of the Robe.” That “jewel studded garment shot with gold” occupies a more prominent place in the poem, as even a casual reading discloses. “But when suddenly I saw my garment reflected as in a mirror I perceived in it my whole soul as well” (112. 76-77). “. . . the clothes are like a mirror to the singer, he recognizes himself in the clothes. The robe is his heavenly likeness. This means that the real nature of man is the one he will possess in heaven.”<sup>8</sup> It is this kind of allegory, reflecting one’s true self, that mirrors our human condition and gives this enduring folk tale a universal appeal to a wide spectrum of spiritualities.

As one interprets it allegorically, one understands the great existential questions. Theodotus, disciple of Valentinus, writing in Asia Minor (ca. 140-160) summarized a gnostic as one who has come to the knowledge of “who we were, and what we have become; where we were . . . whither we are hastening; from what we are being released; what birth is, and what is rebirth” (Clemens Alexandrinus, *Excerpta ex Theodoto* 78.2). These are the burning questions that arise from our existence, which become partners in the dance, providing the common ground on which we can engage in meaningful

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<sup>8</sup> A. F. J. Klijn, “The So Called Hymn of the Pearl,” *Vigiliae Christianae* 14 (1960): 163.

dialogue. Regardless of our religious orientation, or lack of it, these questions drive our spiritual quest.

To summarize Theodotus' famous Valentinian formula: from whence do we come? "When I was an infant too young to talk, in my father's palace, reposing in the wealth and luxury of those who nourished me . . ." (*Acts of Thomas*, 108.1-2, trans. B. Layton) is the gnostic answer to this first question. Jesus said: "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2, KJV). The pseudepigraphic Hymn of Jude Thomas locates our origin in this luxurious "palace" of the pre incarnate soul.

The second question: to where have we fallen? "If you go down to Egypt and bring from there the one pearl . . ." (*Acts of Thomas*, 108.12). Egypt is a picture of this world shrouded in the ignorance of darkness, with its enticements, which cause us to forget our divine origin.

Why are we here? "My parents equipped me with supplies and sent me out from the East, our country, on a mission" (*Acts of Thomas*, 108.3). Our mission is to overcome the "ravenous dragon" which devours our divine dignity and would reduce us to becoming a "foreigner." Our pilgrim/soul temporarily lost his recognition that he was "a child of the (Great) King," and "acted as servant to their king." It was a perilous situation as this royal person was in danger of abandoning his divine mission. In gnostic ideology that's why we are here—to awaken from the slumber of forgetfulness and recover that pearl of *gnosis*, which restores our lost dignity and prepares us to return home.

In order to come to our senses, a gnostic "call" is required. "Arise, and become sober out of (your) sleep. Listen to the words written in this letter. Remember that you

are a child of kings” (*Acts of Thomas*, 108.43-44). The Pauline school issues a similar call to the church of Ephesus. “Therefore it says, ‘Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you’” (Eph. 5:14). “It says”: Where did “it” say this? We find echoes of this call in the Proverbs, which personify “wisdom” as a female voice calling in the streets trying to awaken young men to the dangers of immoral behavior (Prov. 8). In addition to the call of “wisdom” in the Hebrew Bible, wouldn’t it be interesting if the “it” is a reference to a gnostic “call” found in some gnostic text, which is older than the *Hymn of the Pearl*? Jonas eloquently describes this awakening call as the transmudane penetrating the enclosure of the world and making itself heard.<sup>9</sup> It is the first step out of the forgetfulness of sleep and the darkness of ignorance into the consciousness of one’s divine destiny. This is such an elemental aspect of Eastern schools of Gnosticism that Jonas likes to summarize them as religions of the call.

To continue our King James English: whither do we go? “I arose into the realm of peace . . . and . . . prostrated myself before the splendor of the father who had sent it to me” (*Acts of Thomas* 108. 98-99). Armed with the pearl, our pilgrim/soul was able to “make an appearance before the king himself” (*Acts of Thomas* 108.105). Putting aside his rags of poverty (a picture of death) and clothed “in a fine garment with bright colors” he joined the chorus of the redeemed that was “singing hymns with reverent voices” (*Acts of Thomas* 113.103).

It is this song of redemption, which resonates with both orthodox and heretic. Rudolph categorizes Gnosticism in general as a religion of redemption. “The whole

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<sup>9</sup> Jonas, *Gnostic Religion*, 74.

gnostic doctrine of redemption centers upon the restoration to its origin of this divine spark of light, which through fatal events has ‘fallen’ into the world; a restoration mythologically represented as an ‘ascent of the soul.’”<sup>10</sup> For Rudolph, “the ‘ascent of the soul’ . . . is an inseparable constituent of the gnostic hope of redemption; it is regarded as its eschatological component, which makes real what the gnostic has already attained through knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> This last act in the drama of redemption is a welcome partner in the dance because it celebrates the crowning value of a life and, like a rainbow of hope, reaches across sectarian differences.

Thus, all the bases are touched in this mysterious journey of the soul, which is so interwoven with the best of all religious traditions. In moving metaphor and symbolic imagery, that is more art than philosophy, a chord is struck that brings harmony in our dissidence. It is the position of this project that in such a body of myth and allegory; poems, hymns, and prayers; the separate streams of orthodoxy and heresy may flow together in the River of God.

In this classic folktale, *The Hymn of the Pearl*, I believe we have a strong tie with the parables of Jesus. They both have this in common: they are earthly stories with heavenly meanings. While they draw attention to themselves, with human-interest appeal, they point beyond themselves to transcendent truths. In Jesus’ parable, the pearl could be interpreted as the unsurpassable value of the reign of God in a seeker’s life. Any pearl merchant (a person in quest for God) would gladly sacrifice lesser loves and loyalties in order to experience this internal, spiritual kingdom (Matt. 13:45-46). In the

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<sup>10</sup> Rudolph, 91.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 115.

*Hymn of the Pearl*, the pearl may represent not so much the reign of God in this life, but the lost spark of divinity that has been recovered through the enlightenment of *gnosis* that sets the soul free to ascend to its original home. In either case, we have expressions of spirituality that transcend narrow sectarian differences. On doctrinal and philosophical grounds “orthodoxy” and “heresy” built walls between themselves. This hymn is a bridge over troubled waters whose music penetrates man-made barriers. Underneath the surface of our rational differences is a depth of common spirituality that binds us together. Under the skin we are all on a journey, wandering souls looking for the insight and awareness to find our way home.

Kurt Rudolph’s position should be kept in mind: “There is no uniform gnostic ‘redeemer myth’ such as theologians in particular have imagined.”<sup>12</sup> Karen King’s critique of the *Religions Heilgesichte* (History of Religion) scholars is that they artificially constructed a Gnostic redeemer myth “by taking bits and pieces from particular motifs from a variety of historical and literary contexts, and combining them into a single, coherent narrative”, even though “in reality *there is no single existing ancient literary source that gives ‘the Gnostic redeemer myth’ as scholars have ‘reconstructed’ (i.e., invented) it*”<sup>13</sup> (italics in original).

In spite of this insightful critique, within a rich variety of multiform myth making, this project would like to find close correspondences between the concept of redeemer found in the Valentinian school of Gnosticism and the Gospel of John in particular. It is at this point we can appreciate why the Fourth Gospel was such a great favorite in

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<sup>12</sup> Rudolph, 131.

<sup>13</sup> King, *What is Gnosticism?* 109.

Valentinian literature. The emphasis upon a Redeemer sent from God, who would come from the light, dwell in the darkness of this world in the likeness of humanity, awaken and enlighten people who dwell in ignorance, only to return to glory, and thus open the way for those who have come to a knowledge of the Father, to escape the prison of the body and return to the light; is compatible to some schools of gnostic thought. Bultmann speculates that this gnostic redeemer myth provided a necessary context and a useful model for the emerging Christology of the early church. Although most gnostic literature was written after the twenty-seven books that became the New Testament, this project argues that Christian gnosticism contributed to the emergence of a different kind of savior, the seeds of which are planted in the New Testament.

In earlier times, when the enemies were mere humans, . . . saviors were human military leaders. . . . Now, however, the kingdom was no longer that of the land of Israel in Palestine; it was the kingdom of heaven, a spiritual kingdom. We humans were in need now of someone from outside our cosmos of darkness who could lead us back to our true and eternal home.”<sup>14</sup>

Some of the language of the Fourth Gospel is compatible with this myth. John’s Jesus regarded himself as being “sent” from the Father, to reveal God to man and to return to his previous glory. This awareness of being sent seems deeply imbedded in the self-consciousness of Jesus, as portrayed by John. One of many examples would be when the question was asked: “What must we do to perform the works of God?” Jesus answered: “This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom he has sent” (John 6:28 f.). With this awareness, the Christ of John’s Gospel often contemplated his pre-existence and his return to a previous glory. “And this is eternal life, that they may know

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<sup>14</sup> Riley, *River of God*, 21.

you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent. . . . So now, Father, glorify me . . . with the glory that I had in your presence before the world existed” (John 17:3-5). It is in this area of compatibility between the canonical John and gnostic beliefs that we find close parallels that provide open doors for fellowship. Our model of reconciliation would open these doors as widely as possible.

Rudolf Otto in *Das Heilige* speaks of God in terms of the non-rational numinous which is “wholly other.” As such it “cannot be taught, it must be awakened from the spirit.”<sup>15</sup> Unlike other aspects of religion that *are* taught, this unique element in religious experience is aroused and incited often “in the solemn devotional assembly of a congregation at prayer . . . .”<sup>16</sup> The *Tripartite Tractate* expresses it so well:

Therefore, in the song of glorification and in the power of unity of him from whom they have come, they were drawn into a mingling and a combination and a unity with one another. They offered glory worthy of the Father from the pleromatic congregation, which is a single representation although many, because it was brought forth as a glory for the single one and because they came forth toward the one who is himself the Totalities. (*NHL* I,5. 68, 23-37)

The power of such liturgy to hymn the transcendent aspect of deity, which eludes comprehension in rational or ethical terms, is the province of every religion, which is worthy of the term. Whether evoked by music, poetry, or homily: it is the loom on which the warp of orthodoxy and the woof of heresy can intersect and bind so as to weave a more beautiful pattern of reconciliation. This project appeals to the mystical instinct in every believer to assert itself in building bridges of understanding. We agree with Otto

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<sup>15</sup> Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy: An Inquiry into the Non-rational Factor in the Idea of the Divine and its Relation to the Rational*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1958), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.



that orthodoxy has frequently been the mother of rationalism. That in the formulation of “dogma and doctrine” it found “no way to do justice to the non-rational aspect of its subject.”<sup>17</sup> By addressing this rationalistic bias in both orthodoxy and heresy and building into our model room for the “wholly other,” we can develop a more effective strategy of intramural dialogue.

It is the contention of this project that orthodox bishops, priests, and deacons of the ecclesiastical church, along with the laity, might have reached across the isle and connected with Valentinian schools in their midst, especially in the worshipful celebration of a cosmic redeemer. If they failed to do that with consistency, then may we atone for their shortsightedness by learning from their mistakes and reaching out to others of different persuasions.

In completing this fourth chapter we should consider the spirituality of Jesus and Paul as essential features in building our model of reconciliation. The word “spirit,” as we are well aware, has a multitude of meanings. When we refer to spirituality in this section, in most instances, we will be trying to speculate upon the transmundane aspects of God, and the time transcending dimensions in mankind that have enthralled humanity for the last two millennia. In many instances we will be exploring the highest capacities of the human intellect to project a body of beliefs that may make sense of the harsh realities of this world and humankind’s place in it.

It could be argued that Paul’s message, which he called “the ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18) could be abbreviated in four words: “be reconciled to God”

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 3.

(5 :20). In this same passage Paul may be confessing that he once regarded Jesus from a “human point of view” (5:16). Perhaps he regarded him as a charismatic, Jewish, itinerant preacher who radicalized a few disciples to commit to him as a Messiah figure. But, after his Damascus Road experience, he now had reconciled himself to a Christ of faith that transcended the historical Jesus in glory and power. The seeds of majesty that were planted in the living memories of Jesus of Nazareth, had blossomed and born fruit in the sudden transformation of Saul of Tarsus, persecutor of Christians—into Paul the Apostle, preacher of the *Euangellion*. In other words, he had reconciled himself to a Christ of faith that transcended the historical Jesus in glory and power. The *Pleroma* (divine fullness), for Paul, had been unified into one Cosmic Being “in whom all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell” (Col. 1:19). There were no longer 365 Aeons (realms of spiritual power, as in some gnostic mythologies), there was only one, who was also the Archon (ruler) of the cosmos. “For in him the whole fullness of deity dwells bodily” (Col. 2:9). It was this aspect of his Christ centered spirituality which enabled him “to reconcile . . . all things, whether on earth or in heaven . . .” (Col. 1:19).

It could be argued that for Paul, spirituality was not a principle, or a precept but a Person of cosmic magnitude. “For to me living is Christ and dying is gain” (Phil. 1:21). For Paul, true spirituality was not a legalistic system of moral behaviors; it was more a dynamic personal relationship with *Kurios* that consumed his life. The borders of his spirituality were not drawn by dogma or tradition. It could be argued that he had no borders, only orbits that could be held together by the gravitational pull of a Cosmic Christ. The point of view of this paper is that his Christocentrism was massive enough

in meaning to hold various, differing orbits of tradition (that might otherwise have been considered incompatible) together in some systematic order.

To change the metaphor, it assisted him in weaving into his theology many strands of Gnostic beliefs. We see that syncretizing tendency sprinkled generously throughout his epistles. If for him “to live is Christ” then anything that evoked that center might be integrated into his theology and anthropology. With great skill he was able, to a degree, to Christianize Gnosticism and to gnosticise Christianity. With equal skill he was able to spiritualize Judaism. For him, Jewishness was not external but internal. “For a person is not a Jew who is one outwardly, nor is true circumcision something external and physical. Rather, a person is a Jew who is one inwardly, and real circumcision is a matter of the heart—it is spiritual and not literal” (Rom. 2:28-29).

The Christ centered nature of Pauline spirituality is strikingly parallel to the Father centeredness of Jesus recorded in the Fourth Gospel. Everything in Jesus’ life and ministry revolved around his *Abba*/Father relationship. He could “do nothing on his own but only what he sees the Father doing” (John 5:19). “The Father and I are one” (John 10:30). “Whoever has seen me has seen the Father” (John 14:9). In passage after passage, Jesus was as centered on the Father as Paul was upon the Son. This common spirituality permitted them to break down barriers, bridge over cultural chasms, and reach out to those far beyond their own immediate orbits.

Perhaps the aspect that enthralls me most about Paul’s spirituality is the creative tension maintained between the suddenness of conversion and the gradualness of discipleship. It is like the tension between the “gifts” and the “fruit” of the Spirit. The

gifts may come suddenly, but the fruit requires a growing season to ripen. Yet one cannot effectively operate without the other. With dramatic suddenness Paul was struck temporarily blind, yet he saw for the first time the ultimate meaning of Life. It would be difficult to miss this instantaneous element in the spirituality of Paul.

Yet, the suddenness of transformation is always pulling against the gradualness of reformation. Professor Riley's evolutionary concept of punctuated equilibrium is helpful. Saul the persecutor might have gone on harassing the Followers of the Way. But he was "kicking against the goads" (Acts 26:14). With pinpoint accuracy, his bubble of self-righteous indignation burst and he leaped ahead into a new life; no longer as a persecutor but as a preacher of the very movement he was trying so hard to obliterate. Out of this crises came a process of life long learning and growing.

This is a balanced spirituality that this project finds very compelling. As we read in Philippians: "Work out your own salvation with fear and trembling; for it is God who is at work in you . . ." (Phil. 2:12-13). God works it "in" and we work it "out." The former may come suddenly, punctuating our equilibrium. The latter requires a life long process of evolution. From a psychological point of view, it could be argued the Paul was being prepared for his glorious conversion all his life. Perhaps the stoning of Stephan was the final straw that broke the camel's back. But from a theological perspective, when it came it was like a bolt out of the blue. In the view of this paper, this tension between the immediate and the gradual is fundamental to understanding Pauline spirituality.

In the spirituality of Paul, I find a secondary tension between the “flesh” and the “spirit.” “For what the flesh desires is opposed to the Spirit, and what the Spirit desires is opposed to the flesh; for these are opposed to each other, to prevent you from doing what you want” (Gal. 5:17). The believer is torn between this dualistic tug-of-war and must yield to the leading of the Spirit in order to overcome. It is the view of this paper that an understanding of both cosmic and anthropological dualism which Paul shares with both Jesus and Gnosticism, is essential to understanding his spirituality.

On the cosmic plane, Paul sees the believer wrestling “not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places” (Eph. 5:12). For this titanic struggle one needs “the whole armor of God” (5:13). This sounds so much like certain schools of gnostic cosmology that it would be hard not to see the strong influence it exerted upon Pauline theology. While the dualism we find in Pauline Epistles is not so radical as the cosmic mythologies of certain schools of Gnosticism, the parallels are striking.

On the anthropological plane, Paul’s dualistic spirituality puts him right in line with the Jesus of both John’s Gospel and the synoptic Gospels. One sees this dualistic tendency of light versus darkness, flesh versus spirit throughout the Fourth Gospel. Perhaps the classic expression of this is Jesus’ evening interview with Nicodemus recorded in John chapter three. Having difficulty grasping the spirituality of being “born from above,” Jesus says to this highly respected Jewish leader: “What is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). As we are born of the flesh and

endowed with physical life, so we must be born of the Spirit from above, in order to experience the realities of a heavenly kingdom. Trained in traditional Judaism, which was largely monistic, it was hard for Nicodemus to grasp this dualistic concept. With Paul's more generous exposure to Hellenistic thought and Greek culture, so prominent in his hometown of Tarsus, in Syria: he was well prepared to conceptualize, and to experience, the dynamics of a new birth.

Likewise, Jesus' maturation in "Galilee of the Gentiles," which was much more open to Hellenistic forms of Judaism, prepared him for a vital spirituality that could radically separate soul from body. Perhaps the classic expression of this is recorded in Mark 8:36: "For what shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul? Or what shall a man give in exchange for his soul" (KJV). Surely this is at the heart of Jesus' spirituality. In light of the all-surpassing value of one individual human soul, all the material riches of the world pale into insignificance.

These creative tensions inherent in the spirituality of Paul, along with its Christ centeredness, contributed flexibility to the theology of Paul that enabled it to ferment without breaking out of its conceptual categories. I am reminded of the council of Jesus not to put "new wine into old wineskins; otherwise, the wine will burst the skins. . ." (Mark 2:22). The old skins had been rendered brittle and should not be used for a second fermentation. Paul's spirituality, it seems to me, was amazingly flexible and capable of change as he drank deeply from the wells of pre Pauline tradition and mixed it with the ferment of his Damascus Road experience. Within flexible categories this is a good

prescription for meaningful dialogue with those whose religious conversions and maturations are vastly different.

It is a thing of beauty to see Paul's resurrection theology evolving throughout his missionary career. Although the Gospel of John was written over a half century after Paul's conversion, the story of the raising of Lazarus illustrates a point this project would like to make. With the devotion of a pious Jew, Martha confessed her faith in a physical resurrection at the end of the age. "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day" (John 11:24). John's Jesus immediately answered: "I am the resurrection and the life . . ." (11:25). The yeast of a realized eschatology that could cause expectations to rise with a hope for *today* is kneading the old Jewish restoration eschatology. Paul had that leaven growing in himself. By the time we get to Second Corinthians 5:1, the body is only an "earthly tent" and we "have a building . . . a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." To be "absent from the body is to be present" in that heavenly temple (2 Cor. 5:8).

By the time we get to yet more evolved Pauline eschatology as reflected by Colossians: "we have been raised with Christ" (Col. 3:1). This is a natural development of a spiritualizing tendency within the apostle, the seeds of which were planted in Ephesians: "and raised us up with him and seated us with him in heavenly places in Christ Jesus" (Eph. 2:6). The resurrection is no longer a fleshly phenomena reserved for the eschaton. It is a spiritual reality, which is a present possession in every believer. Paul is in the "River of God" (Professor Riley's favorite metaphor) and its current is taking

him toward an ever-widening spirituality that is compatible, on some levels, with both Jesus tradition and Gnostic speculation.

In the view of this project, there are at least two incompatible layers of resurrection theology found in our New Testament. There is an eschatological element in early Pauline Christianity that connected the resurrection with the *parousia* at the end of the age. As Paul admonishes the Thessalonians “not to be quickly shaken in mind or alarmed, either by spirit or by word or by letter, as thought from us, to the effect that the day of the Lord is already here” (2 Thess. 2:2). Early in his theological development that “day of the Lord” could not come until a series of signs had preceded. Yet, there is another layer within Pauline thought that spiritualizes the resurrection as realized eschatology. It could be argued that the great apostle himself swam in both streams. As he approaches martyrdom, in his later ministry, he seldom if ever mentions his earlier apocalyptic views. It seems clear that his understanding has evolved along lines that would be more compatible to Plato than to Moses, to oversimplify the contrast.

Those disciples who were thoroughly schooled in Pauline thought were also divided on this issue. “Among them are Hymenaeus and Philetus, who have swerved from the truth by claiming that the resurrection has already taken place” (2 Tim. 2:17-18). As we said, those who wrote Colossians certainly believed that the resurrection, as a spiritual reality, had already taken place in the experience of the believer. “So if [better translated “since”] you have been raised with Christ, seek the things that are above . . .” (Col. 3:1).



The same “yeast” of a realized eschatology that was leavening the Pauline School was also at work in the Thomas community. Professor Riley observes, “the Gospel of Thomas refutes directly the conception of an eschatological resurrection of the dead at the end of the age.”<sup>18</sup> To support that he quotes the 51<sup>st</sup> saying of that Gospel: “His disciples said to him: ‘When will the Repose of the dead occur? And when will the new cosmos come?’ He said to them: ‘This thing which you expect has come, but you do not recognize it.’” Paul’s realized eschatology, in spiritualizing the resurrection and viewing it as a present reality rather than a future hope, was shared by Thomas Christians and other communities of faith springing up throughout the Mediterranean world of the first and second centuries. A similar leavening process needs to be working in the minds of agents of reconciliation today, if we would be effective in ministering unity to the body of Christ.

Rather than trying to resolve the conflict between these layers of tradition: a better way: a way more compatible with Pauline spirituality, would be to celebrate the victory of Christ over death. In the words of the Valentinian *Treatise on the Resurrection*, the savior “swallowed death,” “he became death’s undoing” and thus “gave us the way to our immortality” (*NHL* I, 4. 45, 15-24). In words attributed to Paul: “he brought life and immortality to light through the gospel” (2 Tim. 1:10). What had been before, in the Sheol/Hades tradition of Semitic and Homeric culture, like an undeveloped negative in ghostly grays, had been developed, “brought to light,” in the living colors of a bodily resurrection. In a song of celebration Paul writes: “death is swallowed up in victory” (1

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<sup>18</sup> Riley, *Resurrection Reconsidered*, 131.

Cor. 15:54)! The Swallower of epic mythology has been swallowed. “Where, O death, is your sting” (15:54)? The ancient tail of Leviathon has been rendered harmless. That is the genius of Pauline spirituality: what could not be resolved on intellectual grounds could be celebrated on spiritual grounds. That element of celebration must always be prominent as we deal with conflicting layers in our religious traditions.

Another area where the spirituality of Jesus and Paul flow in parallel currents is their spiritualized concepts of God and the kingdom of God. Theologically, their concepts of the attributes of deity were remarkably free from anthropomorphisms that are so typical of the Hebrew Bible. In some ways they are more compatible with the Monad of platonic philosophy and gnostic mythology than the prophetic tradition in Judaism. The classic passage in John’s Gospel is the encounter between Jesus and the woman at the well. The orthodox Jews, who had no dealings with Samaritans, considering them worse than Gentiles, would have regarded this Samaritan woman with even greater contempt. Jesus’ spirituality enabled him to see her as a thirsty soul in need of “living water” (John 4:10). He liberated her from a specific time and place of worship by revealing a God that cannot be contained in temples. “God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth” (4:24). Such a God is always available to anyone, anywhere that would worship in “spirit” (rather than in the letter of mechanical ritual). Even for today, this is still a revolutionary concept, which might escape those who get boxed in by ceremony or sacrament. This is important to keep in mind as we build our dialogical model. It is only a tool not a temple.

Jesus spirituality entered into every aspect of his consciousness. He said: “my kingdom is not of this world, else my servants would fight.” Except for such sections like the Olivet discourse, which is dominated by an apocalyptic eschatology, much of Jesus’ teaching is concerning a spiritual kingdom within the person who has surrendered to the rule and reign of God. Within the *Gospel of Thomas*, and Valentinian Gnosticism there is a similar sense of an invisible, spiritual kingdom, which transcends time and place. For instance, in the 113<sup>th</sup> saying of the Gospel of Thomas the disciples question Jesus on when the kingdom would come. Jesus replies, “It will not come by waiting for it. It will not be a matter of saying ‘here it is’ or ‘there it is’. Rather, the kingdom of the father is spread out upon the earth, and men do not see it.”

Pauline spirituality is equally compatible with a spiritualized kingdom. As we read in the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians: “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God, nor does the perishable inherit the imperishable” (I Cor. 15:50). Although we have remnants of Jewish eschatology in Paul’s earlier writings, as we have seen: he seems to evolve toward more spiritual views. A good example of this is: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

In conclusion, one might say that the famous Pauline formula: “in Christ” is the watchword of his spirituality. Just as Jesus was in the Father and the Father was in his son, so the believer is in Christ and Christ is in the believer. Spirituality, then, is not so much a matter of moral reformation but spiritual transformation; not so much will power but resurrection power; not so much turning over a new leaf as experiencing a new life.

One might put it this way: in the Pauline sense, a spiritual person is one who is outliving the indwelling Christ. It is that overflowing which can keep us centered on the beliefs and religious experiences of others without feeling the need to justify ourselves, or prove the “truth” of our position.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

As I look back over the previous four chapters of this project, I can only wish that the apologists had been more in tune with the policy of coexistence, recommended by Jesus, in the Parable of the Tares. Certainly, in the mind of Eusebius, as we have seen; the Gnostics were to be identified as the wild wheat (*lolium temulentum*) sown by “an enemy” in another’s field under the cover of darkness (Matt. 13: 24-30, and 36-43). This mutant form of wheat, not fit for man or beast, represented “the children of the evil one” (Matt. 13:38). As anyone from the perspective of fourth century orthodoxy could see, this was a perfect paradigm for the Gnostics. They held to a degenerative form of Christianity; representing a second sowing after the death of the apostles.

I can understand the righteous indignation of Galilean farmers who listened to the Master Teacher hook and hold their rapt attention with this parable. Who could be so underhanded, so diabolical as to do this to some else’s harvest? They were ready to wreck vengeance upon the perpetrator. But when they offered to go out into the field (which represents the “world”) to tear out those terrible tares, Jesus restrained them saying: “let both of them grow together until the harvest” (Matt. 13:30). This, they did not want to hear. Nor did the heresiologists that were intent on preserving the legend of a virgin church.

The lesson is clear, in the view of this project: even if it were true that Gnostics are like darnel: coexistence is the best policy until harvest time. Because of intertwining root systems (we have seen that Gnosticism was part of the warp and woof of

Christianity) to pull out the one is to endanger the other. Could it be true, that in nature's own inimitable way the wheat would benefit from the presence of the tares? The wheat would have to thrust its roots deeper into the soil in order to survive the competition of the wild wheat. In the market place of ideas, as various christianities competed for adherents, did not the nascent catholic church benefit from the challenge of *gnosis*? The heresy hunters, who were so bent on the polemics of survival, forgot the lesson of the tares. It is a good lesson for us as we seek to facilitate channels for dialogue.

There is a powerful lesson here for those with reforming instincts, who burn with zeal to purify the church. Take care: you may do more harm than good! Those with judgmental attitudes should critique themselves with "harvest" eschatology. The harvest is not until "the end of the age" (Matt. 13:39). The harvesters are not bishops, priests, or deacons but "angels." What right have we to reap where we have not sown (remember, in the parable of the tares, the sower is the Son of Man)? That being the case, unless we are wearing halos, and have wings sprouting from our shoulders, let us leave the separation of wheat from tares to those in a higher pay grade. It is well known that most of the headaches in Christendom are from tight fitting halos (that and starched collars). If we truly believe that there is more good ground than any other kind (according to the Parable of the Sower the hard, shallow, and thorny ground occupied only a small percentage of the total acreage), and that our Savior sows only good seed (the Parable of the Tares): we can commit to a ministry of reconciliation with positive expectations and nonjudgmental attitudes.

One of the most prominent features of our model of reconciliation must be a serious effort to exorcise a spirit of judgementalism. As any Galilean farmer knows: in the seed, in the tender sprout, in the stalk, in the bladed stalk; the naked eye cannot differentiate between wheat and tares. They are identical. It is only when the ear begins to form on the shaft that one can tell them apart, and by then it is too late to do anything about it. Jesus' policy of coexistence: "let them grow together . . ." makes good sense. Let us carry this farmer's mentality with us as we go out into the fields of ecumenism.

In the view of this project, a key scripture for any cleric going out to practice a ministry of reconciliation is: "For the time has come for judgment to begin" (and end) "with the household of God" (2 Peter 4:17). That is: let those who consider themselves authentic churchmen, and churchwomen, judge themselves (the beginning) unworthy to judge anyone else (the ending). We simply do not have the discernment it takes to accurately differentiate between the "orthodox" and the "heretic". The Pauline admonition is of paramount importance to our paradigm: "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another?" (Rom. 14:4) When we take ourselves too seriously and abandon our servant status we are most apt to fall into this trap. There is nothing healthier than a sense of humor to put space between ourselves and our inclinations to be judgmental.

One finds a subtle, refreshing sense of humor in the parables of Jesus that is immensely helpful. With superb sarcasm, Jesus tells the story of one who tries to carefully remove some foreign matter from someone's eye. In a context that warns against judging, we discover this delightful hyperbole. "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye" (Matt. 7:4)? The

ridiculous exaggeration puts a smile on our face. We picture a concerned citizen, so gently trying to daub a tiny splinter from the eye of his neighbor, with complete lack of awareness of the two-by-four hanging out of his own eye. The point is this: we can never take the ministry of reconciliation too seriously, but we can take ourselves too seriously as we go about the practice of this ministry. A healthy, wholesome sense of humor is such a beautiful gift in establishing rapport. Let's thoroughly mix it with the materials that make our model.

In seeking to pull together, in summary fashion, the salient features of our model of reconciliation, we do well to begin with the introduction to our project. In order to "permit the reshaping of new models for ministry" we need to "soften the rigid categories of our preconceptions" (8). Many who come from more fundamental branches of Christianity have unconsciously formed rather rigid categories, which contain sacrosanct beliefs that are too revered to challenge. The reconciler must run the risk of a crisis of faith, in order to restore those old wineskins with a "washing of regeneration and renewing of the Holy Ghost" (Titus 3:5, KJV). Just as brittle wineskins can be renewed by repeated washings and anointing of oil and softened for another fermentation, so the agent of reconciliation must be willing to undergo a kind of "brain washing." The purpose of this is not to wash away core beliefs but to soften presuppositions. The monumental contributions of modern scholarship are not to be feared, but to be welcomed as renewal agents that lubricate inflexible categories.

One way to trigger this renewal process is to open the mind to the wide-ranging diversities that were inherent in the early church from the very beginning. This will



equip us to challenge the “sacred cows” such as the primacy of orthodoxy and the pious legends of an Apostles’ Creed and apostolic succession. At the same time it will prepare us to celebrate the diverse and contradictory Christologies that were revered in the communities of faith in the second century.

As we walked the confusing labyrinth of multiform Christologies in the second chapter, we met Johannine Christianity, which we perceived as having remarkable syncretistic capacities. Some scholars view this center of Christianity as sectarian and more exclusive in its composition. This project has taken the opposite position that it was flexible enough to embrace a breadth of Christologies that were held in orbit by a common allegiance to the personhood of Jesus. On one extreme, the Ebionites could be included because they magnified the sterling qualities of Jesus’ humanity. On the other extreme, the Docetics found fellowship because they accentuated a vision of his divinity. The Modalists had room between these Christological polarities to function because of their effort to preserve the unity of God and yet affirm both the divinity and the humanity of Jesus. If our perception of the Johannine community is correct, how did this eclecticism develop? The view of this paper is that their Christocentrism was massive enough in meaning to hold them in their diverse orbits.

This project proposes a model that is without boundary lines. There are no borders, only beliefs that are tentative enough to resist doctrinal formulation or dogmatic stratification. Like the heliocentric view of our solar system: the function of these beliefs is simply to encircle the personality of Jesus with adoration and worship and avoid the propositional thinking that is so characteristic of certain ecclesiastical institutions. The

crucial factor is not *what* we believe, but in *whom* we reposit our trust? The famous Pauline declaration provides us with a pattern: “For I know the one in whom I have put my trust, and I am sure that he is able to guard until that day what I have entrusted to him” (2 Tim. 1:12).

Such a Christocentric approach need not shrink into a narrow fundamentalism but expand into an ever-enlarging universe of thought. Because the Christ of faith, in the view of this project, is more expansive than any theological categories into which we might try to contain him, this characteristic tends to expand our model of reconciliation.

For example, we find embedded in our tradition an interpretation of Jesus that permitted him to be seen by different people in different ways, depending on the capacity of an individual to perceive. There is an even longer tradition that goes back into Greek Epic of how a god might take different forms, in different situations, as the need required. We even see seeds of a polymorphic Christ in the New Testament, regarding the post-resurrection appearances. The two disciples on the way to Emmaus is a case in point. The longer ending of Mark says that Jesus “appeared in another form” (Mark 16:12). In Luke’s version the two didn’t recognize the “stranger” along the road to Emmaus, or even after they had reached their destination and sat at table. Only after much dialogue, “in the breaking of bread,” were their “eyes opened and they recognized him” (Luke 24:13-35).

These polymorphic epiphanies are highly developed in some of the apocryphal literature of the New Testament. The Acts of John gives us a fascinating example:

Drusiana had said, ‘The Lord appeared to me in the tomb in the form of John and of a youth.’ And as they were perplexed and in some ways were not yet

confirmed in the faith, John said with patience: ‘Men and brethren, you have suffered nothing that is *strange or incredible* in your perception of the Lord . . . in *accordance with everyone’s capability* I will communicate to you those things. . . .’ ( *Acts of John*, 87-88, trans. Elliott, italics added.)

A few lines following, the *Acts of John* makes this statement: “And when we left this place . . . he again appeared to me, baldheaded but with a thick and flowing beard; but to James he appeared as a youth whose beard was just starting” (89). There is a bright thread woven into the fabric of our tradition, which permits us to see Jesus appearing to different people, at different times, in different forms “in accordance with everyone’s capability.” Why should that seem “strange or incredible?” Why not make this a prominent feature in our model of reconciliation? One from a Buddhist background might see Jesus in the guise of Buddha, etc. A polymorphic Jesus is limited only by a person’s capacity to see. Therefore, the Christ centeredness of our model need not lead to a flat, one-dimensional approach. It is capable, even within the parameters of our tradition, of multidimensional expansion.

In chapter three we saw how orthodoxy, Thomas Christianity, and Valentinianism dealt with diversities and some of the controversies that were byproducts. In the midst of this complex clashing of religious movements, with the heated rhetoric and misunderstanding that was generated: one cannot help thinking, there has to be a better way. We postulated that nobler path in the fourth chapter. Using the inspiring scene in the *Acts of John* described as “The Round Dance of the Cross,” we postulated the communal experience of celebration as superior to intellectual speculation or doctrinal formulation. As a congregation experiences a sense of the sacred through the worship of prayer, hymns, and homily something special may happen: like a solar system, the

magnetism of the Monad may draw one to itself. Such mystical moments may be rare, but life transforming. Congregants have described such sacred moments as being emptied of self and filled with a heightened sense of divine transcendence.

Because our theology has profound anthropological implications, as one is drawn to the Monad, one is also drawn to oneself and those existential questions, which arise from the human condition. In a recent lecture by Professor Riley, he depicted the major elements of religion by three overlapping circles.<sup>1</sup> He labeled these circles “Law,” “Grace,” and “Enlightenment.” These circumferences are not mutually exclusive. In religious traditions that major in codes of morality there is also a lot of grace and enlightenment. Riley did not venture a speculation on how we might label those common, overlapping areas. In building a model of reconciliation, this project would like to paint this shared space with the brush of existentialism. The questions of ultimate meaning that are grounded in being are the common concerns of all religious traditions. In classic Gnosticism that exists for the purpose of answering these questions with myths of redemption, and ecclesiastical Christianity which is more oriented to creedal formulas: we have the best opportunity to experience *koinonia*. It is here that we can join hands around a common center and “dance” while “the whole universe takes part in the dancing” (*Acts of John* 94.1-4). Who are we; why are we here; from where have we come; to where are we going? These are steps in the dialogical dance that everyone knows. Therefore everyone can take part in this sharing of human experience, with its theological implications, in an atmosphere of acceptance.

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<sup>1</sup> Riley, NT 492, “Gnosticism,” Oct. 23, 2003, Claremont School of Theology.

The ancient worldview of a three-story universe, with God sitting on a throne above the clouds, was reversed by a geocentric universe, inspiring and requiring revolutionary expansions upon one's understanding of God. In this project, we have endeavored to move from a geocentric to a heliocentric paradigm in which our little worlds of religious opinion are not the center of anything. What then shall we place at the center? Every one must find one's own center, in the view of this project. For those who have a Christian orientation, this project proposes a bright and "morning star" (Rev. 2:28) that reverses our role from center to circumference, from master to servant. This has the potential to turn one's values inside out and upside down.

The Davidic, Mosaic, and Abrahamic covenants, which regulated the old world of tribal religion, were reversed by Jesus. He turned the Deuteronomic curses into blessings. The so-called "last curse": "for anyone hung on a tree is under God's curse" (Deut. 21:23), Jesus turned into a blessing by "redeeming us from the curse of the law" (Gal. 3:13). He was fond of saying: "You have heard that it was said ... but I say to you" (Matt. 5:27 ff.). In Deuteronomy Moses promises to the faithful follower of Yahweh a long and happy life. He will live long beneath his vine and fig tree in the land of peace and prosperity. The curses for unfaithfulness include "homelessness, persecution, capture, enslavement, and early death."<sup>2</sup> Yet Jesus was homeless: "The foxes have holes, and the birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man hath not where to lay his head" (Matt. 8:20, KJV). Persecution was promoted to a Beatitude: "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:10).

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<sup>2</sup> Riley, *One Jesus, Many Christs*, 64.

Jesus died at an early age mocked and ridiculed by his enemies and deserted by his friends. He was always reversing the values of the old concepts of blessedness. Those who “love their life lose it” (John 12:25). “But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first” (Matt. 19:30).

When the disciples questioned Jesus as to true meaning of greatness, he replied:

You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. It will *not* be so among you; but whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave; just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Matt. 20:25-28, italics added)

Here again the model for greatness is turned on its head. It would seem that the way up is down in the kingdom of God. Those who want to be great are to become the servants of all. In a success-oriented paradigm, people claw their way to the top of *the pyramid*, where each level brings more subordinates and fewer superiors. Their ambition is to reach the apex where the whole organizational structure fans out beneath them. Jesus effectively inverts the pyramid. The apex is at the bottom where the believer meets an *ebed Yahweh* who has come “not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:28).

Those who own such a model of greatness must be willing to have their lives radically altered in the process. Such a sea change, such a “big bang,” is the best preparation for an expanding universe of reconciliation.

## APPENDICES

The appendices are a series of four devotional themes, from Ephesians, intended for use in a retreat setting, to enhance interdenominational dialogue among church leaders from a wide spectrum of theological positions. These are not intended to be complete sermonic manuscripts but only outline suggestions as to possible directions the homilist may go. One might use the first five chapters of this project as lecture material. The following homiletical suggestions are intended to contribute to a devotional atmosphere that hopefully will enhance a spirit of ecumenicity.

## *Appendix A*

### The Blessings of Being in Christ.

Ephesians 1:1-23

#### Introduction

In our series of four homilies, based on the first four chapters of Ephesians, we will endeavor to observe the bright thread of spiritual unity as it weaves itself through this Epistle. The “mission to unite all races and nations in a single brotherhood of worship and love” (*Interpreter’s Bible*, Vol. 10, 605) seems to lie at the heart of the theological purpose of this letter. There are passages in Ephesians where the exalted vision of the union of all humanity in a single community of worship nearly takes one’s breath away.

Many New Testament scholars regard Ephesians not as a single letter dealing specifically with the problems of a local congregation, but as a more general document intended to circulate around to all the congregations in Ephesus and, perhaps wider, to local communities of Christians throughout the area of Western Asia Minor.

When we stop to consider the various theologies and Christologies that could be represented in one congregation, not to mention in one geographical region, we begin to appreciate the genius of the Pauline school in its ability to draw circles wide enough to embrace a diverse spectrum of Christian experience; including those who were drawn to gnostic myths and metaphysics.

For those of us who minister in main-line denominations that include a broad cross-section of doctrinal positions, we may sometimes wonder if we can function effectively in this diverse religious environment. Equipped with “the armor of God” (Eph. 5:11), which I would like to interpret as inclusive language; the integrating tendencies in Pauline theology, we hope to develop those skills that will enable us to exercise a “ministry of reconciliation” (2 Cor. 5:18) in the most diverse of religious contexts.

With that in mind, let us turn to the first chapter of Ephesians and highlight some of the main themes that minister reconciliation and unity to the church of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

I. Taking the third verse of the first chapter as our text, the first of these integrating concepts is the oft-repeated formula in the letters of Paul: “in Christ Jesus.”

“The mysteries of God are not written in the stars to be unveiled by the skill of the astrologer. It is ‘in Christ’ that his purpose is ‘set forth’ (Ibid., 606). This is the keynote of the whole epistle occurring more than 30 times. I suggest that we take it as the central feature of our morning meditations and our evening vespers.

I would like to encourage us, in these moments of meditation to think of a rectangular figure with limiting borders which shut us in and others out. Let us imagine ourselves comfortable and cozy with those who are boxed in with us. We have our



interpretations of Christ and good fellowship with like-minded people who reflect our values and religious practices. Now, let us imagine ourselves breaking out of our boxes and finding ourselves in a geocentric universe. Our little world is the center of everything. Everything revolves around our world of orthodoxy and our denominational preference. Now, let us exchange that geocentric for a heliocentric model. We are getting out of ourselves into Christ. Our religious experience is no longer the center but the circumference. There are no longer any borders but orbits. Christ is the center of everything. This bright and “morning star” is massive enough in meaning, radiant enough in glory to hold everything together in unity. My orbit may be different from yours, but we all are ‘dancing’ around the same center in a celebration of worship and adoration.

That is what being “in Christ” means to me. It means that I have broken out of my theological box, so to speak. My religious views are not the center of anything. I am held in a “Son” centered system, which supplies me with all the light and warmth I need to find my own orbit of influence. My role is not to draw lines that include or exclude, my task is to encircle my center with praise and devotion. That paradigm seems to work for me in the constant critique of keeping the main thing, the main thing.

Lest we slip into a culture of individualism, we must not neglect the corporate sense of being “in Christ.” As the Suffering Servant, in the Old Testament, is sometimes equated with Israel: so Christ in the New Testament can represent the new Israel. In this sense, being “in Christ” reminds us that no one can be a Christian by one’s self, but in fellowship with others. The days of Lone Ranger Christianity where we “rode off in a cloud of dust” to do our own thing in our own way without any sense of submission or corporate accountability are long past for most of us. For us, being “in Christ” means that we are constantly networking with others and constantly learning to value the varieties of their religious experiences.

## II. The second overarching theme is “blessed...with every spiritual blessing.”

These blessings are deemed to be “spiritual” because they belong to the higher realm of the imperishable. Because they are not just temporal, they can open up regions of the spirit where we may have a foretaste of heaven. The word “every” reminds us that God’s blessings are not partial; he withholds nothing that would enrich our lives. “In Christ” we have the whole package, so to speak; not just the appetizer but also the main course.

The litany of spiritual blessings, which are mentioned throughout this first chapter, are best sung as a magnificent hymn of adoration. We are not encountering dry doctrine here, but the “music of the spheres”, as the ancients expressed the sounds of the solar system in motion. Indeed, these spiritual blessings rise above local concerns and provincial interests with a universal cosmic significance, which helps us gravitate towards each other.

We find in verses 4 -23 that we were chosen “before the foundation of the world”; “destined for adoption” into the Father’s forever family. Not only that but “we have redemption...the forgiveness of our trespasses....” “In Christ we have also obtained an

inheritance.” “In him” we also “were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit.” (Gnostic literature often mentions the fivefold seals, which were quite probably linked with secret initiation rites).

All of these blessings come to us by virtue of being “in Christ.” I will never forget a Roman Catholic priest whose church I frequently attended for the Saturday evening Mass. When I first started attending I introduced myself and said something like this: “Father, not being a part of the “faithful” I will not plan to participate in the Eucharist.” His reply astounded me: “Are you in Christ?” I replied in the affirmative. “Am I in Christ?” he asked. Again, I replied in the affirmative. “Then,” he said, “you have as much right to partake as do I!” I never expected to hear a priest say that. I told him that I didn’t want him to get into trouble with his bishop. He said: “what can they do, fire me?” We became and remain fast friends. It is not in our humanity, our religion, or our own goodness that these blessings have overtaken us, but in our mystical relationship of being “in Christ.” We need to open up our wide-angle lens to see that everyone one who wants to be in Christ (and those who would want to be if they only knew that such a privileged position were possible) is revolving around the same center.

As we get into the spirit of this inspired Epistle, we are often amazed at the vast scope of its message which extends beyond Western Asia Minor, to the Mediterranean world, and eventually to the far reaches of the cosmos. As the 10<sup>th</sup> verse reminds us: the fullness of God’s plan is “to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on the earth.” A “gathering up” is going on, which is moving toward the cosmic Christ as the center of a spiritual universe. Divisions are being healed, barriers are being broken down, and differences are being reconciled. Whenever I take time (which is not often enough) to contemplate the fullness of the divine plan of unification, revealed so clearly in this epistle, my devotional life is enriched. In our walks through the forest during this weekend, I suggest we spend some quality time letting Paul’s vision of unity speak to us from Ephesians.

This litany of spiritual blessings, which inspire us to sing: “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing Tune our Hearts to Sing Thy Grace,” is not followed by doctrinal formulations or dogmatic assertions, but by a prayer that the readers may come to “know him.” Obviously this is more than an intellectual knowledge; this is an inner “enlightenment” that brings us into a personal acquaintance with “the riches of his glorious inheritance among the saints.” The distinction is like the difference between knowing about, in an objective sense and knowing personally, in a subjective sense, so that the “eyes of the heart” are “enlightened.” That kind of insight can equip us to be more effect agents for change in our respective groups.

III. The third theme is one that would have been understood and appreciated by gnostic Christians and others who were defined as heretics by the creeds of the fourth and fifth centuries: “in the heavenly places.”

This brings us into a realm of “mystery” which extends far beyond our rational capacities. In some transcendent sense, the Father who raised his Son from the dead “and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places” (v. 20), has also blessed us “with

every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.” Scholars have often observed how close Ephesians and Colossians are in parallel content. Here is a good example. The third chapter of Colossians exhorts us to “seek the things that are above, where Christ is seated at the right hand of God.” The reason for this is that, in a spiritual sense we are “raised with Christ.” It would seem that the resurrection is more than a future hope; it is a present reality in the life of the believer. “Since” that is the case, Paul argues that we should “set our minds on things that are above” because our true life is “hidden with Christ in God.” What we call “life” is really “death.” Our true self is even now seated in the heavenlies. Who can understand such things? If we cannot grasp it intellectually, we can be grasped by it spiritually.

### Conclusion

The Gospel chorus urges us to “count our blessings, name them one by one, and it will surprise us what the Lord has done.” As a devotional exercise we can spend quality time counting the blessings this first chapter names: “chosen,” “destined,” “adopted,” “redeemed,” “forgiven,” “sealed”: These are a sample of those named in just the first 14 verses. As we name them one by one and contemplate their significance we begin to appreciate what our faith position of being “in Christ” means for us individually and corporately. This is our center, our nucleus around which everything else must be organized and energized.

## *Appendix B*

### Breaking Down Barriers and Building Bridges

Ephesians 2:1-22.

#### Introduction

Some of us here this morning can remember back into the 50s as propeller driven aircraft were being made obsolete by jets. As the speed increased, pilots were more and more encountering that mysterious sound barrier. You will recall that a number of test pilots lost their lives because of the turbulence created by that wall of sound. Because of structural and design changes, modern, super-sonic aircraft break through that barrier so smoothly, those on the ground seldom hear the sonic booms. What was once an insurmountable barrier is now a common occurrence.

If you were to ask me what Christ is doing in the world; I would say: "he is building bridges and breaking through barriers." There are so many sound barriers that people encounter as they try to hear the Gospel and break through into a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. The 14th verse of the 2nd ch. of Ephesians puts it so well: "He . . . has broken down the middle wall of division between us." He *has* and he *is* continuing to break down those partitions that divide people into warring camps, into schisms and ism, frictions and factions.

It is reported that at the height of the Civil War, Abraham Lincoln was asked: "Is God on the side of the North?" Lincoln is said to have replied: "It is more important to ask, is the North on the side of God?" In light of Eph. 2:14, we can have confidence that as we chip away at walls of "hostility" and misunderstanding we are fellow laborers with Christ.

I. That's our first point: the spiritual head of our church is in the business of breaking through and breaking down barriers.

I was serving as Senior Pastor of the Grace Baptist Church in Heidelberg, West Germany, when the infamous Berlin Wall came down in November of 1989. I have a piece of rock that came from that wall. Every time I look at it, I remember the East Germans who invented the most ingenious ways of getting through 'check point Charlie' and escaping to the West. Hundreds were shot to death by tower guards as they tried in vain to negotiate "no-man's land" and climb that bloody wall. I experienced first hand the euphoria that swept through Berlin and the whole country. People were literally dancing in the streets. For the first time in 40 years German people could flow freely back and forth and embrace their sisters and brothers. For me, that has become an historical paradigm, which illustrates what Christ is doing in our modern world. He is dismantling those man-made barriers that divide people, churches and nations.

In our text, Eph. 2:14, Paul is referring to symbols of separation that were meaningful for him and his time. He was likely referring to those man-made divisions,

which partitioned the temple of Jerusalem into various sections. There was the Court of the Women. Jewish women were allowed to congregate in this area. There was a formidable barrier, which kept them from going any farther. Any woman who attempted to go beyond this point into the temple proper would be ostracized by her people and excommunicated from her synagogue. Paul is saying that in the kingdom of God, there are no longer distinctions based on gender. The salvation that comes through Jesus and the gifts of the Holy Spirit are generic, they have no relevance to sexual distinctions. As the prophet Joel predicted, when God pours out His Spirit upon all flesh our sons and our daughters shall prophesy. If prophecy, the ability to speak forth the message of salvation, is one of the greatest of spiritual gifts, what lesser gift should be denied a woman because of her gender?

Alongside the Court of the Women was the Court of the Gentiles. Gentile converts to Judaism could gather in this court but there was a wall forbidding them to go any farther into the temple on pain of death. I hear the inspired Apostle to the Gentiles saying that the cross of Christ has also leveled this infamous wall. As there is no male or female, neither is there any more Jew or Gentile in God's sight. Racial and cultural differences are no longer relevant in a kingdom of the heart. The ground at the foot of the cross is level. Gentiles can now come directly to God the same way as Jewish Christians, by faith in the Messiah of Israel who is also the Savior of the Gentile world. There is no difference; we are all sinners, saved by grace no matter how diverse we are on the outside.

In addition to the Court of the Women and the Court of the Gentiles, there was one other barrier in the temple: that thick curtain dividing the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies. Scripture tells us that when Jesus was crucified that opaque shroud was divided in twain from top to bottom as though the finger of God had rent it asunder, no strings attached. It was not just divided at the top for those who were members of a religious elite, or those with special enlightenment. It was rent from top to bottom for all God's children.

Throughout the O.T. no one could enter the Holy of Holies, except the Great High Priest; and only he on the Day of Atonement, with the blood of the innocent lamb. When the Lamb of God was slain for the sins of the world, that impenetrable barrier was parted enabling men and women, Jews and Gentiles, bond and free; indeed, "whosoever will may come" into the most holy place of God's presence and receive His precious gift of eternal life. No one is excluded but the person who refuses to be included.

Everywhere we look we find ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious barriers that restrict access and shut certain people out. If we want to be about our Father's business, let us do whatever we can, in our sphere of influence, to bring down those walls.

II. In addition to breaking barriers our risen and living Christ is also in the business of building bridges.

When I entered the military Chaplaincy in June of 1967, I completed the basic chaplain's course at Ft. Hamilton, NY. Through the window of my BOQ, (Bachelor Officers' Quarters) the last thing I would see as I drifted off to sleep was the Verrazano

bridge spanning over the Hudson River, joining Stanton Island with the Brooklyn borough. It was quite a sight. Coming one direction was a stream of white headlights. Going the other direction was a ribbon of red taillights connecting people on the island with the mainland. I thought of those gigantic pillars imbedded deeply into the bedrock of the river holding up those suspension cables, which supported that long span of concrete and steel. I was told that it was the longest suspension bridge in the world, longer even than the Golden Gate.

I think of that when I read this passage of Scripture. Our Savior's love is a high tower, which is planted firm and deep in the heart of God. The upward pull of his love is like suspension cables holding us secure. We need not be stranded on an island of sectarian loneliness; we can reach the mainland of his love. I like to put it this way: the horizontal beam of his cross is wide enough to span the chasms of misunderstanding in the broken body of Christ and bring the healing of the "spirit of unity in the bond of peace." Jesus, as I understand him, is in the bridge building business. During this retreat we are taking some time to consider some of those over-arching principles that can bridge the troubled waters of our denominational divisions.

III. In addition to barriers and bridges, this inspired passage of Scripture uses another analogy, which helps us understand what our Architect is doing in the world today.

He's not only in the business of breaking barriers and building bridges, he's also building a 'sky scraper'. It's a marvelous structure with a strong foundation that is built upon "the Apostles and the prophets." Jesus Christ is "the chief corner stone" after which all the others are measured and patterned. Every generation, since apostolic times, has added its own story to this high rise of hope. If you consider a generation to be 40 years, this building is 50 stories tall. Only 50 generations from Christ to the present time. That doesn't seem like such a long time.

When I visited New York, one of the first things I wanted to see was the Empire State building. At that time it was the tallest building in the world. As I recall, it was over 100 stories. As I looked down from the top, my California mentality could not help thinking: "this is not where I would want to be in an earthquake." Our guide corrected me. "This is exactly the place you would want to be in an earthquake. This building would bend but it would not break." Then he told us about the foundation. On each corner of the foundation are pads, which act like cushions to absorb the shock and the shake. They give supple strength and flexibility to the building to withstand any major quake.

### Conclusion

As you read the headlines do you get the impression that God is shaking this old world of ours like a rag doll; that those forces are growing in intensity? From the 50<sup>th</sup> floor of the high rise of hope, I've got a story to tell. It is a story that comes right up from our foundation of Apostles and prophets. The twelfth chapter of Hebrews speaks of the removal of what is shaken—so that what cannot be shaken may remain. "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us give thanks..." (Heb.

12:27-28). Let us give thanks that this building, which grows up from the foundation of apostles and prophets, patterned after the “Corner Stone”, is the place to be when the shock waves come.

## *Appendix C*

### The Dimensions of Divine Love

Ephesians 3:1-21

#### Introduction

In our scripture we find Paul in prayer for the Ephesian Christians. As he prays his heart is enlarged and the dimensions of God's love stretch his mind. As he "bows his knees to the Father" he asks that the believers in Ephesus may have "power to comprehend . . . the breadth and length and height and depth" of a love that "surpasses knowledge." That's quite an order.

I like to connect this Ephesian prayer with the prayer of Jesus in the Upper Room on the night he was betrayed and sentenced to death. It seems clear that John's Jesus is including in his prayer not just the original disciples but also those generations that would follow. "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word" (John 17:20). We can believe, there is room for us in this exalted prayer, the central thrust of which is "that we may all be one." That we his followers may be one with each other as he is one with the Father. The oneness of Father and Son is our paradigm for understanding the oneness we should seek with each other. Jesus realized that it was only in this way "that the "world may believe that" he was heaven sent. The world is still waiting and watching for such a convincing demonstration of spiritual oneness.

With that Upper Room prayer in the back of our minds, let us turn our attention to Paul's inspiring prayer in the 3<sup>rd</sup> chapter of Ephesians. The two dovetail quite well, because a comprehension of the vastness of four-dimensional love is our best preparation to feel the pain of the broken body of Christ.

#### I. Let us seek to envision the "breadth" of it.

Paul's prayer is broad enough to encompass the whole family of God: it reaches out to "every family in heaven and on earth" (v. 15). If there are families in heaven they are included in this circle of prayer. What about the families of denominations on earth? Catholic, Protestant, high church, low church, no church? Our classic hymn says it so well: "In Christ there is no East and West, in him no South or North, but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth." There are no Mason Dixon lines, no Orient and Occident, no black or white. God's love is wide enough to take in this whole oblate spheroid we call planet earth and still has sufficient breadth to contain our expanding universe. It is a love that contains everything but cannot be contained by anything.

Alongside our text, Eph. 3:18, I would like to compare another familiar verse, John 3:16. Notice again, how beautifully they overlap and dovetail with one another. John 3:16 says: "For God so loved the world." God's love is wide enough to take the whole world into its heart; and not just the world of nature with its beauty, but also the



world of fatally flawed humankind. Somewhere I ran across a bit of doggerel that read something like this: "He drew a circle to shut me out, rebel, heretic, a thing to flout. But God and me had the wit to win; we drew a circle that took him in." We are good at drawing circles, which include people that look and live like we do, in a congenial atmosphere of homogeneity. To be stretched by the breadth of divine love is our best hope of transcending such limitations.

II. Can we know that "which surpasses knowledge" and "comprehend" something of the length of God's love?

In the words of the 21<sup>st</sup> verse: "to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen." There is no beginning and there is no ending to divine love. The One, who came out of eternity as a tangent to our tiny circle of cosmic dust, extends beyond our solar system, our galaxy, and touches the edge of the universe. Even the universe cannot contain such love. The Pauline paradox is appropriate in describing it as a knowledge that "surpasses knowledge."

Let us again bring into view John 3:16. How broad is God's love? "God so loved the world." How long is it? "He gave his only begotten son." The true test of any love is the lengths to which it will go to reach the beloved. God went to great lengths to touch our lives with beauty. Perhaps it is only as we kneel at the cross and look up that we can get a glimpse of the length of such unconditional love.

God's love is not shortened by any of those ifs, ands, buts or maybes that are so typical of human affection. "I may love you if you meet my needs and when you make me feel loved." But if you can't meet my conditions and fulfill my expectations, then my love will be directed elsewhere.

The Hebrew Bible describes the arm of God as "not shortened that it cannot save." No matter how far a field we may wander looking for human affection, we can never get beyond the reach of unconditional love. What a comfort to relax in this repose: there is nothing we can do to make our Father love us any more, and there is nothing we can fail to do to make Him love us any less. He may not love our behavior, but He loves our being to an infinite degree, which cannot be added to or diminished. In the security of such a love, we can risk reaching out in reconciliation to a bruised and broken body of fellow believers.

To our devotional exercise we might add this thought. If God's love is so long, if it went so far to give us His only son, is there anything short of that it will withhold? Paul's response is: "He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?" (Rom. 8:32) The lengths of such a love makes even Jesus prayer for unity in the Upper Room reachable.

III. Let us fill our minds with something of the height of it.

Verse :19 helps us to get a handle on this third dimension: "so that you might be filled with all the fullness of God." Can you conceive of a higher ambition than that? In many non-canonical gnostic writings, such as we find in the Nag Hammadi library, there

is frequent reference to the *pleroma*, or divine fullness. In some gnostic schools this was conceived of as the out flowing of a Being of Transcendence that is so glorious it can only be described apophatically with a *via negativa*. This God is so much greater than any category we could assign, it can only be described by what it isn't: ineffable, incomprehensible, immutable, etc. To be filled with even a fraction of that kind of fullness goes beyond our capacity to conceptualize. But, if our exegesis is correct, that's the goal of divine love, to fill us to the measure of that which is without measure. Again we resort to John 3:16: "that we should not perish but have everlasting life." What a plan: to find us where we are in the depths of our perishing world, ("that we should not perish") and lift us the heights of everlasting life. No wonder the prophet says: "as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are...my thoughts than your thoughts" (Isa. 55:9).

#### IV. It would seem that the love of God is as deep as it is high.

It is said that God could live anywhere in this universe, but our God has chosen the depth of the human heart. The 17<sup>th</sup> verse gives expression to this fourth dimension: "that Christ might dwell in your hearts by faith." "There is no bottom to the heart of God," as Corrie Ten Boom was fond of affirming. She won the right to make this affirmation by her survival of a Nazi concentration camp. Many of us know the story. During WWII Corrie, her sister Betsy, and her elderly father took the side of the Jews. Not an easy thing to do, even in Harlem, Holland where Mr. Ten Boom had long been the village watchmaker and repairer. They built a secret room in their house they called "the hiding place." Jews who were being smuggled along the under ground railroad to freedom would enter the watchmakers shop, and not come out because they were being hidden from the Gestapo until the coast was clear. The Ten Booms were finally arrested and sent off to the concentration camp in Flossenbug. Corrie's elderly father didn't last long. Her sister died. Only she survived the horrors of the holocaust. In her book, *The Hiding Place*, she makes this statement: "there is no pit so deep that God's love is not deeper still."

It is so deep that, in the words of this Pauline prayer, we can be "rooted and grounded" in it. We have seen how plants suffer when they outgrow their container and become root bound. Spiritually speaking, we never need to worry about becoming root bound because the love of God is deep enough for us to keep growing throughout all eternity. I grew up in a church that constantly stressed being grounded in the faith. That's fine to be established in the fundamental doctrines of Christianity. But unless we are "rooted and grounded in love," it is all for naught.

Again, let us bring into the picture John 3:16. The depth of God's love is seen in the kind of world Jesus came into. He did not enter the best of all possible worlds. He did not limit himself to the world of nature with its exquisite beauties. He came into a perishing world that we should not "perish." As we trumpet the Evangel throughout the land we have good news for those who honestly feel they have fallen from grace and sunk beneath the forgiveness and mercy of God. We may not be able to measure up to the high standards of God's righteousness. But none of us can sink beneath the depths of His love.

### Conclusion

One last time, we repair to the most familiar verse in the Bible: “God *so* loved.” There is an ocean of meaning in that tiny two-letter word. It tells us that God loves in such an infinite degree, in such a transcendently glorious manner that no one can plumb the depths of it, reach the heights of it, span the breadths of it, or explore the lengths of it.

I remember the first time I heard a Black choir sing the spiritual: “So high you can’t get over it, so wide you can’t get around it, so low you can’t get under it, you must come in at the door.” Those of us, who are Christian in our orientation, feel that in Jesus we have something like a door. Through his sinless humanity, we can enter into something that is otherwise too vast for us and experience the love of God on our own level. Then we can more effectively minister as a unifying presence in our denominational worlds.

## *Appendix D*

### The Sevenfold Unity of the Spirit.

Ephesians 4:1-32.

#### Introduction

Our positions as denominational leaders and our presence at this ecumenical retreat, affirm the fact that we have a deep sense of having been called. Each one of our callings carries the fingerprint of our unique individuality. One aspect our Judeo-Christian tradition shares with many other religious traditions is the importance of the “call.” We were asleep but a summons came to awaken us. We were intoxicated by the allurements of material things but a quickening has brought us to sobriety. It is interesting how often we find this expressed in both canonical and non-canonical writing. Some days ago I was reading in the exquisite “Hymn of the Pearl,” which is recorded in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*. I read the “call” that came to the royal son who had become comfortable in “Egypt” (a picture of this material world) and forgot his divine origin. The call came to him in the form of a speaking letter, which seemed to have a voice of its own:

From your father the King of Kings, your mother who rules the East. . . . To our child in Egypt, Peace! Arise, and become sober out of your sleep. Listen to the words written in this letter. Remember that you are a child of kings. You have fallen under a servile yoke.

I couldn’t help thinking: how similar that sounds to the call we hear trumpeted forth in the fifth chapter of Ephesians. “Sleeper, awake! Rise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you!” A positive response to this kind of challenge is common ground for all of us who sense a calling for ministry. It is one of those ties that bind us together with chords of collegiality.

The question arises: how can we walk worthily of such an ennobling call? In the words of our passage, how can we “lead a life worthy of the calling to which we have been called?” Part of the answer is: “making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.” The paradox is that no matter how much effort we expend, we cannot create this desired unity; but in the words of the KJV we can “keep” it. We cannot manufacture but we can “maintain” it. Our efforts should go into nurturing and cultivating what God has already built into that living organism we call the church.

The theme of unity, which plays as a refrain through the first three chapters of this book, now breaks forth into a full chorus of harmony. Some ascribe a significance to the number seven as an expression of completeness. The litany of completion that our scripture suggests is sevenfold: “one body, one Spirit, one hope, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all.” One way we can minister reconciliation is to keep the nature of this sevenfold unity uppermost in our minds and hearts.

#### I. “There is one body.”

If we view that one body as something more than an ecclesiastical organization but an invisible spiritual organism in which every child of God is like an organ, or a living cell; we immediately appreciate our vast diversity and our mutual dependency. Is there any living organism that is as multifunctional as a human body? Every organ supplies its own vital function. No organ may say to another: "I have no need of you," as Paul the Apostle reminds us in the twelfth chapter of I Corinthians: "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'" The eye can see where to go and what to do, but it is dependent upon the hand to do it. "Nor again the head to the feet, 'I have no need of you.'" In this Pauline metaphor the "head" represents the Savior. Without his hands and feet his intentions for this world cannot be carried out.

On the campus of a Catholic church in San Diego there is a huge figure of Jesus standing with arms outstretched in a posture of invitation. But this famous figure, rising above the church grounds, has no hands or feet: reminding those who stare up at it that they are the organs of labor in the congregation of the faithful. In addition to "peace be with you," it would be appropriate to include in our liturgy the phrase, "I have need of you."

Not only is the head dependent upon the other parts of the body, and the various organs dependent upon one another, but even those who consider themselves outside the body are none the less included in this Pauline metaphor. "The foot might say, 'because I am not a hand I am not a part of the body,' that would not make it any less a part of the body." Because I am not a "born again" Christian, I am not a part of Christ's body. Or worse yet, because I *am* a "born again" Christian, and you are not, *you* are not a part of the body! That cuts against the grain of a spirit of ecumenicity we would try to "maintain." There are millions who might say: "because I am this and not that, 'I am not a part of the body.'" Based upon this Pauline paradigm, are we not encouraged to regard them as belonging to that which they claim they have no part in?

As we consider something as diverse as a human body with its various parts providing a complex array of vital functions which are essential to survival: let us not lose sight of a common life flowing through each cell that brings unity in diversity. The vast network of a circulatory system cleanses each cell of impurities and supplies all the nutriment that bring life and health. What a marvelous metaphor! It helps us affirm the unity in our diversity and the communal nature of our life together. The essence of spiritual life that flows in me, flows through you, whether one recognizes it or not.

Medical science tells us that when a patient receives an organ transplant the phenomenon of rejection begins immediately to set in. Through a strong regimen of anti-rejection medication the body must be convinced that the new organ is not foreign matter but its own flesh and blood. We certainly have such strong medicine in this inspired metaphor of the church as one body. Let us use it to convince ourselves that our sister is our sister and our brother is our brother even when they affirm otherwise.

## II. There is "one Spirit."

We may use our own judgment whether to capitalize *pneuma* or not. If we choose not, then we may conceive of this one spirit as the longing of the human heart, which drives all people everywhere to seek for transcendent meaning. In my recent studies of gnostic religion, I came to understand that Gnosticism existed, in part, to answer those universal questions that arise from the human condition: why are we here, from whence have we come, whither are we bound? These existential issues are the driving forces in all religious experience. They are like “one spirit” that breathes through our common quest. These overarching issues build bridges that connect us to every body of believers in whatever denominational expression they may be affiliated.

If we are inclined to capitalize “Spirit” then we are stretched by the inclusiveness of this concept. As we read in I Cor.12: “For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.” We can debate the baptismal form and the liturgical meaning of the ceremony. But there is a Spirit-baptism that transcends all those doctrinal shades of meaning. A baptism that places us within an invisible universal body of religious experience when we come to know a Father God “who is above all and through all and in all.”

As the nascent church discovered on the day of Pentecost when the prophecy of Joel began to glow with new meaning, that pouring out of the spirit washed away gender bias (“your sons and your daughters shall prophesy”). It filled up generation gaps (“your young men shall see visions and your old men shall dream dreams”). It blurred the borders of class prejudice (“even upon my slaves, both men and women...I will pour out my Spirit”). The great apostle to the Gentiles, having drunk at that fountain, was able to break down barriers of exclusion. “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal. 3:28).

It is not the purpose of this ecumenical retreat to trivialize the differences among us, or to pretend they are not important. One of the purposes is to suggest that there is a spirit (or Spirit) working in our midst that is like new wine. For a fine fermentation we may need to find some new wineskins that are flexible enough to contain those changes that are going on in our individual and corporate lives.

### III. There is “one hope.”

Early in my brief career as a hospital chaplain, I discovered that when people loose hope they are soon gone. I saw my role as helping people to face their diminishing hope and find grounds for a renewed hope on whatever level they were willing to explore. As believers we are inheritors of a “blessed hope.” Many in the body of Christ tie that hope to a second coming of Christ at the close of this age. There certainly are expressions of an apocalyptic eschatology throughout the scriptures. If such a hope works in the lives of people to motivate them to live a noble life for God, then amen!

For those who find little solace in a restoration eschatology that promises a literal return of the Savior to set up a physical kingdom on planet earth, there is hope for us in a realized eschatology that views the kingdom much like the church: as an invisible force that is spread out upon the earth which lives in the hearts of those who yearn for “peace

and good will among men.” We can find both layers of this “one hope” in the New Testament. That is fortunate for those of us who endeavor to live a life that is informed by scripture. The authority of scripture permits us to cherish a kingdom, which “is not of this world”: a kingdom that reigns in the lives of those who have surrendered to the rule of God. Paul reminds us “that flesh and blood cannot enter this kingdom” (I Cor. 15:50). Ah, but a mind and heart that yearns: “thy kingdom come thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven” can and does. The Apostle Paul must have been in the grip of such a hope when he wrote: “For the kingdom of God is not food and drink but righteousness and peace and joy in the Holy Spirit” (Rom. 14:17).

#### IV. “There is one Lord.”

When we consider the plethora of Christologies that were a part of Christianity from its inception: from the highest Christology of Docetism, to the lowest of Adoptionism and all the others in between, how dare we speak of “one Lord?” A professor of mine, Dr. Riley, likes to speak of one Jesus and many Christs. It is that one historic Jesus that gave birth to so many different kinds of authentic christianities that we want to make the center of our ecumenical efforts.

When we make that leap from the historical Jesus to the Christ of faith his lordship expands to cosmic proportions. He is then experienced not only as Lord of the church but also as the “head over all things” (1:22). In the sublime language of one who had met the Christ of glory on the Damascus Road, Paul extends the reach of lordship to the farthest edges of the universe: “far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the age to come. And he has put all things under his feet and has made him the head over all things. . . .”

To meditate upon this “one Lord” is to better appreciate why so many of the early Christian martyrs gave their lives rather than affirm, “Caesar is Lord.” So many of them couldn’t even say it (not even with their fingers crossed) because that was the exalted title that was reserved only for the “King of Kings and the Lord of Lords,” the Emperor of their salvation.

#### V. “There is one faith.”

With the plethora of our denominations we are inclined to shrug our shoulders and think, how can there be only one faith when there are so many faith groups? I suggest for this conference that we look on faith not as a body of beliefs but phenomenologically as something that is exercised every day of our lives. Driving up the mountain there were times when another car would be hurdling down, taking the turn to the right as I took it to the left. We passed without a barrier between because I trusted my life that the other driver would stay on his side of the road. That’s faith. We use it 100 times a day, when we mail a letter, when we submit to a medical procedure, etc. I am suggesting that the faith we use in everyday life is qualitatively the same as so-called saving faith. The only difference is the object. The same faith we put in ourselves, or

other people, is of the same stuff as that which we reposit in God. It is the phenomenology of faith and not its intellectual content that makes it one. We can celebrate that one faith even when we can't agree on its doctrinal formulations or its ecclesiastical expressions.

#### VI. "There is one baptism."

That makes us smile when we think of infant baptism, believers' baptism, baptism by immersion, sprinkling, pouring, baptism as a sacrament, or a sign, etc. If there is one issue that has divided us through the last two millennia it is baptism. Yet there is a deeper sense in which it can be affirmed that there is indeed only one baptism. Jesus promised his disciples that as "John baptized with water, they would be baptized with the Holy Spirit" (Acts 1:5). On the Day of Pentecost that "promise of the Father" was fulfilled in a fullness of the Spirit that energized the body of believers with new life and equipped the church for a ministry to "the ends of the earth" (1:8). It is that "one baptism," which is renewed in every generation by a fresh outpouring of the Spirit that we should make the focus of our retreat.

#### VII. "There is one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all."

I like the universal language of this statement of faith. The same Father is above us all; lives in us all and works through all of us. Jesus taught us to pray: "our Father which art in heaven. . . ." The one who is over us, in us and through us is not my Father or your Father but *our* Father." He is, as the scripture makes clear, "without respect of persons," meaning that he is without favoritism.

Isn't it amazing how radically Jesus redefined the human family? When he was informed that his immediate family: his mother, and brothers, and sisters were seeking to talk with him, he looked around and asked: "Who are my mother and my brothers?" His answer: "Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother" (Mark 3:31 ff). Can one do the "will of God" with being a card carrying Christian; without being circumcised, catechized, and baptized? Why can't we be as radical as Jesus in redefining the family of God?

### Conclusion

At the conclusion of our passage we read this stirring statement, which is more drama than doctrine: "When he ascended on high he made captivity itself a captive; he gave gifts to his people." Paul goes on to explain those gifts as "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers." We have been given as gifts to the people of God. We not only have gifts, we *are* gifts. You are God's gift to some flock. Being gifted is one thing. Being a gift is quite another. Being a captivated gift is yet another. My ambition is to be captured by the grandeur of this sevenfold vision of unity. I not only



want to capture the intellectual implications and applications of this concept; I want to be captured by its claim upon my life.

Some time ago a dedicated layman said to me: "Pastor there has never been a church like the one you envision and there never will be this side of heaven." Be that as it may, the Chief Actor in this unfolding drama who "descended to the lower parts of the earth" to bring us this vision of oneness; the one who is "ascended far above all the heavens" has led us as his captives to be captivated by a higher vision. Let that vision breath new life into our ministries of reconciliation.

As we conclude this closing session, let us remember the Eucharistic prayer of the *Didache* (a second century document on church order and discipline).

As this piece [of bread] was scattered over the hills (perhaps depicting the sowing of wheat on the hillsides of Judea, parenthesis added) and then was brought together and made one, so let your Church be brought together from the ends of the earth into your Kingdom. For yours is the glory and power through Jesus Christ forever (*Didache* 9.4).

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